

How to Start a Student Organization for Liberty

(The Abridged Version)



Second Edition

By Alexander McCobin

© Students For Liberty, 2009

A Free Academy, A Free Society



Students For Liberty

Introduction: Why Start a Student Organization for Liberty?

If you are reading this handbook, I assume that you are interested in the principles of liberty and recognize the importance of promoting liberty in both academia and society. There are two questions you may be asking yourself, though. First, is liberty a cause worthy enough for me to dedicate my time? Second, if liberty is a worthwhile cause, is starting a student organization the right thing to do? The first question I can easily answer. Liberty is constantly under attack in the modern world. In both society and academia, a belief in liberty is held by a minority of individuals in the face of a majority who seek authoritarian and oppressive policies that infringe individual rights. A stand must be taken now to rout greater support for liberty and protect the basic rights held by all individuals. The second question is more difficult, but can still be easily answered in the affirmative. There are three reasons why forming an organization at the student level is important.

First, the collegiate environment provides an ideal time to reach out to individuals interested in the ideas of liberty. During college, students are supposed to challenge their preconceived ideas and either learn that what they have been taught up to then is incorrect or legitimate in the face of opposing ideas. Whereas pro-liberty views may be silenced in other realms of life, they are more easily respected in an environment of free inquiry that college is supposed to represent. What's more, it is during this exchange of ideas in the collegiate years that most people form their life-long beliefs. School is a very impressionable time for individuals. Developing a clear presence of the philosophy of liberty in this environment is essential to the acceptance of the ideas of liberty by individuals in the future. Even if other students do not embrace liberty while in school, they will be much more likely to be tolerant and respectful of such ideas in the future if a student organization for liberty exists.

Second, student organizations provide safe havens for students to explore the ideas of liberty in an otherwise hostile environment. The previous point emphasized the *ideal* of college as an open forum of ideas where constant debate and discourse occurs that shapes the beliefs of future society, but the reality is different. Students are tempted to sacrifice their beliefs for the sake of conformity with their peers and professors. An institutionalized organization that promotes liberty on campus, however, can provide both logistical and inspirational support for students interested in liberty. It is also a symbol students can look towards. Just knowing that there are others who support liberty can make all the difference in the world.

Third, students can make a difference. A Venezuelan student once told me, "We [students] are not just the future. We are the present too." This statement is incredibly powerful. Preparing students to become the leaders of liberty in the future is one of the most obvious reasons to reach out to students. But rallying students to support the cause of liberty today has the tremendous potential to change society as we know it faster than anyone predicts. When you consider the impact that student protesters against the draft had in the 60's of defining a generation, the support students rallied in opposition to apartheid South Africa in the 80's, and the work of Venezuelan students to challenge dictatorial powers of Hugo Chavez and promote democracy today, it should be evident that students can transform society.



Students For Liberty

Overview: The 3 Types of Organizations

There are three types of organizations that students dedicated to liberty can create on their campus. This may be a difficult concept for some people, but the most important purpose of creating a student group is to have a forum for pro-liberty students to come together, discuss their ideas, and know that they are not alone. From this foundational starting point, there are varying degrees of activity that organizations may engage in to maintain their existence and achieve the goal of having a pro-liberty forum on campus.

The first type is the Social Club. This type of organization involves the least amount of work and is for the student who wants to see some kind of place for pro-liberty students to meet and interact be formed, but doesn't have the time to begin a full-blown organization. This type of organization simply requires that a social event be held once a month. Invite pro-liberty students to meet at a restaurant, bar, or student's apartment with food and drinks to just socialize and chat about liberty. Advertise on facebook, fliers, word of mouth, etc., and just create a space for students dedicated to liberty to feel comfortable and supported. When people come, hand out fliers for SFL, IHS & FEE seminars, Cato University, etc.

The second type is the Reading/Discussion Group. If you want to be more involved than a social club, but not ready to have a variety of activities, the reading/discussion group is the next step. This type of organization meets once a week or every other week to simply discuss issues related to liberty and have discussions. A more developed version of this group will discuss an article or book chapter at meetings that everyone has read prior to arriving. This brings in an educational aspect to the organization as well as social activities to promote the organization's knowledge of the intellectual foundations of liberty.

The third type is the Activities-Based Organization. For the student interested in creating a full-blown organization that will obtain prominence for the cause of liberty and rival other campus organizations for students' time and energy, the activities-based organization is the most comprehensive option available. This organization takes a multi-faceted approach, not only providing a forum for pro-liberty students to socialize and learn, but does so through a variety of means like bringing in speakers, debating other groups on campus, holding movie nights, demonstrations, etc. The activities-based organization encompasses a variety of programs that make the cause of liberty part of the forefront of campus life.

This handbook primarily provides an outline for the reading/discussion group and the activities-based organization. This handbook provides a simple, yet in-depth outline for action in starting an in-depth student organization. Creating a social club can be a highly valuable activity, but it does not take much work. Advertising is key for this group, which should take up most of your time. But creating a large organization with more complex activities takes much more work and demands an instruction manual with more details than a social club. If you are dedicated to liberty and want to see an option available to students on your campus to get involved with the cause of liberty, any of these three types is a terrific start, and SFL is here to help. If you need anything, please contact us at info@studentsforliberty.org.



Students For Liberty

Summary: 10 Steps to Starting a Student Organization

1. **Find Others**: A student organization is defined by the people who comprise it more than anything else. Especially when an organization is being formed, having a dedicated group of individuals who will dedicate their time and energy to the organization is absolutely crucial. Before you can do anything else, you need to find a group of 2-5 students (including yourself) 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 what you are working towards. The culmination of the discussion of why you want to start a student group should be 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 how you will be known from here out so choose the name 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. **Ratify a Constitution**: The Constitution of a student organization formalizes the organization's existence and lays out the rules for how the organization shall 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. **Develop a Strategic Action Plan**: 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. The document that summarizes this information is your Strategic Action Plan.
7. **Set Up a List-Serve**: Every organization needs a list-serve. Use this to send information to all students about what your organization is doing and keep in touch with members about what direction they would like to see the organization head in.
8. **Hold Events**: Hold regular events around campus that are open to the school community and advertise them heavily. An organization is about holding events and doing activities that accomplish your mission, so make sure to hold them often.
9. **Get School Recognition**: To make your organization official and institutionalize it, you should seek school recognition. Once you have school recognition, your organization will receive many benefits from the school that will help ensure its continued existence.
10. **Train New Leadership**: The final stage of starting a student organization is to ensure its long-term survival and make sure the organization is more than just its founders. Training younger students to take over the organization is crucial to turning a project of several individuals into an established organization.



Students For Liberty

Step 1: Find Others

Once you've decided 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, having a group of students provides legitimacy to what you're doing. Rather than being one person who is trying to make a radical change on campus, you are a group of people who are trying to make a reasonable change.

The question now becomes: how do you find others to join you in undertaking the incredible task of starting a student organization? Here are a few recommendations.

- 1) *Friends*. If you have friends who support liberty like yourself, get them involved.
- 2) *Facebook*. Post on Facebook groups related to the organization you want to start.
- 3) *Flier Campus*. Dedicate 2 hours to going around and just get your name out there.
- 4) *Other Organizations*. There are students who support liberty on every campus. Tell other groups like the College Republicans, College Democrats, Debate Team, Model U.N., Mock Trial, Political Science Honors Society, Economics Honors Society, etc. and get their members to join.

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 for the organization. This covers *the values* your organization embraces, and *the activities* you will engage in. *The values* drive the existence of the organization and what all organizational efforts promote. Determine how broad/specific you want to be, but make sure to leave room for some debate so the group does not dictate the specifics of peoples' lives.

The activities, cover the strategy for promoting your values. There are three general types that you can engage in: networking, education, and activism. 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 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 could mean holding protests and demonstrations against a new city ordinance. This could mean taking on an illegitimate speech code at your university by writing op-eds to the school paper and petitioning the administration. The general theme underlying activism is an effort to make some sort of policy change in the



Students For Liberty

near future. A student organization is more than capable of subsuming all three of these types of activities at once. You can do social events along with a lecture series on liberty, and protest unjust laws. But you may not want to do this. If there is a tangible problem you want to address on campus, networking is not such an issue as activism. If your campus is too politically apathetic to raise any attention from this activity, though, then you may want to focus on education and networking. It's important to think about what you want to get out of the organization and what sort of change you hope to make.¹

Step 3: Come Up With 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 and so you must make sure that it conveys what you want it to do so and avoid connotations that you do not want to have. It should represent the mission of your organization in as appealing a manner as possible. Some terms that include special consideration include:

1. *Libertarian*- If you are a libertarian organization and wish to express yourself as such, then this is a good name. If you are not affiliated with the Libertarian Party, though, but instead advocate the philosophy of libertarianism, then the name may cause you problems. The first thing people think about when they hear the term libertarian is the LP. This has caused other organizations much difficulty in the past with recruitment and funding. It is a question of whether you prioritize expressing your organization for what you believe in and being more appealing to more people.
2. *Liberty*- Liberty is a safer word to use. The term connotes only good things in people's minds. Liberty is that which everyone seeks to have. 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.
3. *Freedom*- "Freedom" or "Free" is similar to liberty in its connotations.
4. *College/Campus*- If you include the term "college" or "campus" in your name, you suggest an affiliation with a partisan organization.²

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 be existing within the university's bureaucracy, so you need to figure out how to maneuver it. Here are some important things you should learn from the outset:

- What are the requirements for becoming a recognized student organization?

¹ For sample mission statements, please visit www.studentsforliberty.org/college/publications and review the sample student organization constitutions provided, which include mission statements.

² E.g. College Democrats and College Republicans.



Students For Liberty

- What are the benefits of becoming a recognized student organization?
- How do you reserve rooms for events on campus?
- Are there restrictions to reserving rooms on campus?
- What sorts of events are allowed on campus?³
- How can you receive school funding for your organization?⁴
- How can you get around much of the school's red tape?

Step 5: Ratify a Constitution

To formalize your organization and begin the process of institutionalization, you next need to draft up and ratify a constitution. The purpose of this is not to lay out every detail of the organization, but recognize the organization's existence and provide the general framework from 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:

- 1) Name
- 2) Mission Statement
- 3) Executive Board
 - a. Structure of the Board (distribution of responsibilities)
 - b. Selection of the Board (both when and how)
- 4) Membership
- 5) Meetings
- 6) Amendments
- 7) Ratification

Step 6: Set Goals

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. These will direct you towards making explicit both your long-term and short-term goals. Most of your long-term goals should have been addressed during the formation of your mission statement. Your goals do not need to be written into your mission statement because the mission statement is primarily about your values. But you should have some concept of what

³ 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.

⁴ The issue of accepting funding from your school is controversial in 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, it may likely be used by others to hinder liberty.



Students For Liberty

you want to see your organization look like in ten years. These long-term goals can be as simple as having a continually existing presence on campus where students feel safe to support liberty with others around them. Or your long-term goals can be more dramatic like establishing a pro-liberty presence on campus that rivals authoritarianism. Sample goals include:

- The number of members who regularly attend meetings
- The number of emails on your list-serve
- The number of events held in the semester
- The amount of money raised for the organization
- The number of policies changed on campus as a result of your efforts

Step 7: Set Up a List-Serve

The list-serve should be created early on, but it should not be an immediate project. The problem with starting a list-serve as soon as you have an idea that you want to start an organization is that it will likely fail in the beginning. If the list-serve is not active, it sets the precedent for its members to not check messages sent over the list-serve and to treat your organization as defunct. Starting the list-serve once you have momentum behind you makes the organization look much better and keeps people more involved. 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-serves⁵ 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 your organization is active.

Step 8: Hold Events

Events are what make or break an organization. You need to have fun activities that members identify with your organization. If someone were to ask you: "What does your organization do?" your activities would be the answer. The most common and basic event to hold is the regular meeting. This should either be weekly or bi-monthly to keep members involved. Cover administrative issues at these meetings, but have something else to make it exciting. Have a debate/discussion right after administrative details on issues pertaining to liberty. This is a great way to get members excited about liberty, interacting with one another, and do it all with minimal effort. Additional events include:

⁵ 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.



Students For Liberty

- Bring a speaker to campus
- Movie Night
- Debate another student organization (e.g. the campus socialists)
- Social Events
- Organizational Dinner
- Protest/Demonstration
- Visit another student organization dedicated to liberty at a nearby campus
- Attend a Students For Liberty Conference (Attending events outside your university is a great way to build camaraderie and bonds between members. And Students For Liberty Conferences are incredibly fun events as well.)

Step 9: 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 that you're a political organization, greater accountability for actions to the university, and limitations on marketing strategies given university restrictions.⁶

Step 10: Train New Leadership

All your previous work in starting a student organization is for naught if the organization does not survive past your time. You should not simply be focused on the success of your organization during your own school days, but also during your time as an alumnus. This issue will not be discussed in-depth in this handbook because it is to be the subject of a separate handbook. This is such an important issue that it cannot be addressed in such short space. However, once you have grounded an organization, you must immediately start looking to the future. Do not joke with others that the group will die when you graduate or else you've just wasted years of your life. Identify potential leaders who can take over the group when you are younger. Put the lessons you learn along the way in writing so you can easily transfer the information to future leaders. And ingrain the importance of your organization and the success of your organization in the minds of new members who join.

By starting to do these things and always thinking about the future, you will be able to have dinner with its members when you come back to school at your 5-year reunion. When that happens, you'll know that you've created an actual organization that has made a lasting difference. And that is the reason why you're reading this.

⁶ Note: 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.



Students For Liberty

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.

Most student groups think that the Constitution defines the organization. This is wrong. It is the membership that defines the organization. The Constitution is a tertiary issue to getting the right people to join and holding the right events. The same goes with all procedural issues with founding an organization. Being recognized by the organization does not mean you will have big events or last beyond the first year. Having committed members who enjoy showing up to meetings and are passionate about the organization does.

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 no longer than 4 sentences so you 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 people who are 99% aligned with you won't join.

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. It is true that if you kill every project, the organization will die. But you have to kill the projects that are just wasting your time.

Mistake #4: Assuming people know of your existence.

By signing the Constitution of your organization, fireworks do not erupt in the sky spelling out your organization's name. No one knows you exist. It is your job to let people know you exist and it will take lots of work to get people to know about your organization. Only very well established organizations that have been around for at least 5 years are readily known on campus. Put your efforts into making known that you're around through fliers, facebook, and getting a story in the campus newspaper.

Mistake #5: Failure to set Goals

Many student organizations when founded, do so only with 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, which is crucial to making sure you are on track to founding a stable organization.



Students For Liberty

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 are necessary ranging from Facebook to campus fliering to inviting classes to word of mouth. Use every means available to promote your organization and events to make sure that every person who could possibly be interested to participate.

Mistake #7: Not delegating responsibility.

Many students who start organizations have difficulty in 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, though, as 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. Simple checks like sending emails and making phone calls prevent problems like only having 4 people attend a speaker's event.

Mistake #9: Ignoring other groups.

When students are starting 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 on the other side of ideology. 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. All 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 for 1, 2 and 5 years from now today. 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.