

Coalition Building

Coalition (activist definition): an "organization of organizations" united around a common issue and clear goal(s); however, sometimes the term "coalition" is used to refer to groups of diverse individuals or organizations of individuals who are involved in other groups as well.

Issue: communicates what you are fighting for to help solve your problem; an issue is what activist organizations focus on. If the problem is name-calling and slurs, your issue could be to reduce slurs.

Questions to ask when you are thinking about building a coalition with another organization:

- What would your unifying issue(s) be?
- What resources could come from this organization?
- What obstacles might you encounter?

Guidelines for successful coalition-building:

- 1. Choose unifying issues.** The most effective coalitions come together around a common issue. Make sure the development of group goals is a joint process, rather than one or two group representatives deciding the goals and then inviting others to join.
- 2. Understand and respect each group's self interest.** There must be a balance between the goals and needs of the coalition and of the individual organizations.
- 3. Respect each group's internal process.** It is important to understand and respect the differences among groups. These differences are often apparent in processes or chains of command for decision-making. Make a commitment to learning about the unique values, history, interests, structure, and agenda of the other groups and organizations.
- 4. Agree to disagree.**
- 5. Structure decision-making carefully.**
- 6. Distribute credit fairly.** Recognize that contributions vary. Appreciate different contributions. Each organization will have something different to offer. Each one is important, so be sure to acknowledge them all, whether they be volunteers, meeting space, funding, copying, publicity, leafleting, passing resolutions, or other resources.
- 7. Give and Take.** It is important to build on existing relationships and connections with other organizations. Don't just ask for or expect support; be prepared to give it.
- 8. Develop a Common Strategy.** The strength of a coalition is in its unity. Work together with other organizations to develop a strategy that makes sense for everyone. The tactics you choose should be ones that all the organizations can endorse. If not, the tactics should be taken by individual organizations independent of the coalition.
- 9. Be Strategic.** Building coalitions in and of themselves requires a good strategy. Which organizations you ask, who asks them, and what order to ask them are all questions to figure out.
- 10. To ensure consistency, send the same representative to each coalition meeting.** This helps meetings run more smoothly. These individuals should also be decision-making members of the organizations they represent.
- 11. Formalize Your Coalition.** It is best to make explicit agreements. Make sure everyone understands what their responsibilities and rights are. Being clear can help prevent conflicts.

This resource was adapted from the NGLTF's "Comprehensive Manual for Campus Organizing" (Shepard, Yeskel, Outcalt - 1995) and materials from the United States Student Association's Grassroots Organizing Weekend (GROW) Program.