

Creating Departmental or Faculty Associations

for direct and participative democracy to empower all members

This document is aimed at students working on campuses where no student association exists at the department or faculty level. Where associations do exist, many of these principles can still be applied.

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Relevant websites:

<http://freeeducationmontreal.org>

<http://www.stopthehike.ca>

<http://gsaconcordia.ca>

<http://concordiastudents.ca>

Written for Free Education Montreal as part of the
Strike Documentation Project.
October, 2012

Version 1.0.1

 **FREE EDUCATION**
M O N T R E A L

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Sections 3 and 4 of this document were presented at workshops given by Rushdia Mehreen (with Irmak Bahar and Alain Savard respectively) at the Ontario Strike Training Camp, Toronto, July 2012.

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Mobilizing from the grassroots

GENERAL ASSEMBLIES at the Departmental or Faculty-level

At the core of this document is the departmental or faculty-level student general assembly (GA). The GA is *democratic* for several reasons:

- A GA is *directly democratic* as it allows everyone to express themselves and have an equal say -- everyone can propose and amend motions (propositions);
- It opens up space for *discussion and debate* and allows collective decisions.
- A few people (union or association executives) do not decide on behalf of others. Those *elected are accountable* to the General Assembly, the most democratic body.
- It can be called at any time by the student association, as well as by *any* member who collects the minimum amount of signatures required by the association's by-laws (regulations);
- It allows for *local sovereignty* within the department or the faculty;

A general assembly is also important because the discussion and debate helps students to consider *new opinions and solutions*, and to decide what can be done collectively.

Adapted from
ASSÉ/CLASSE's *Ultimatum* Newspaper, May 2012.
<http://freeeducationmontreal.org/on-general-assembly/>
(accessed Oct. 22, 2012).



About this document

In addition to covering how to create a student association, this document includes how to build a core team (mob squad) that can do outreach and mobilize for the creation of an association and/or to hold a general assembly.

An ideal situation would be to have a couple of people who can organize the first general assembly (taking care of the logistics and such) and the rest doing the mobilization work.

You will find a brief overview of each of these aspects in this document.

1 Importance of organizing and mobilizing from the grassroots

Creating departmental or faculty associations is more effective, democratic and participatory than centralized structures. Departments are where people spend most of their time, working and meeting with people in their discipline. The formation of mobilized and ideally militant departmental associations built upon structures of direct democracy insures that people come together to make decisions collectively.

Collective decisions in turn have higher chances of being implemented because all students implicated in taking decisions feel responsible to carry out actions (going on strike or showing up to a demonstration, for instance). The general assembly structure empowers all members giving them more power -- shifting power dynamics, from the hands of the few executives to the members at large -- to decide on the direction of the association as a whole as well as to have a say in the way the association functions, the events it organizes and campaigns in which it takes part. Holding executives responsible becomes more feasible when the decision making process is transparent via general assemblies.

An association would also cater to various needs of all of its student body (membership). Ideally, students should be able to bring any issue that is of interest to them to a general assembly¹ and engage in collective discussion and decision making.

1.1 Department or faculty-level?

An association can be made within a department as small as 10-20 students or a faculty as large as 4,000 people. The key to determining the best scale is identifying the level of cohesion within a faculty or department. In general, it is preferable to organize at the departmental level. This is a more manageable scale, and people have an easier time playing an active role in the decision-making process².

¹ Special general assemblies, such as strike GA would have a specific agenda, otherwise the agenda would be open so that students can bring any issue to the table.

² We encourage readers of this document to adapt this model to their needs and particularities. What we suggest here, by no means, is a final word or the only way of organizing.

2 Creation of mobilizing team (the “mob squad”)

The first critical step is forming a core group of committed activists (2 or 3 people at least) in your department. Find people who want to organize a department or faculty-wide general assembly and exchange contacts (email and phone). This will form the base of your mobilization or “mob squad.”

Mob Squads would meet at least on a weekly basis during times of significant mobilization. Make these meetings inclusive so that your mob squad can grow. Advertise the meetings and have a sign-up sheet for the departmental mob squad and try to get more people to join the team. Having meetings with food (a pizza, for instance, before or after the meeting) makes meetings less intimidating and allows new members to join and integrate easily.

2.1 Tasks of the mob squad

- a) If your membership does not care about austerity or broader political issues, then it is important to engage in dialogue and spread the word about what is going on and why it is important. This would be the first task of the squad, even before creating the association.
- b) Collect the email addresses of **everyone** in your department, if you do not already have a list from the department secretary. Going to classes and passing a simple sign-up sheet (so everyone can be contacted with events, updates and for the GAs) would be one of the best ways of getting **ALL** emails. The collection of emails can be done jointly with announcements in point (a) above – educating the membership of the situation/upcoming events. Thus, for example, making class visits about an upcoming departmental general assembly to discuss austerity and what to do about it and collecting contact information at the same time.
- c) For details on mob-squad tasks/doing outreach, see the mobilization section below.

3 Creating a departmental or faculty association

At least three ways can be followed for creating an association! The purpose of making a departmental association is to make the association relevant to its members. If at the time of creating the association, the members do not care about austerity, choosing a different issue that students are concerned about (ex. something campus or department related) could help mobilize the members. For example, at McGill University in Québec, students were mobilized around the issue of a student-run cafeteria that administration was closing down because of a contract with a multinational supplier on campus. The three methods of creating a departmental association are outlined below:

3.1 Method 1: By-laws first (could be relatively long process)

The mob squad drafts a set of by-laws,³ which could be fairly extensive or quite basic.⁴ During the drafting process, the growing association membership should be invited to give feedback on the draft by-laws. A few iterations would be required to make the by-law writing process inclusive and to insure that no aspect of your constituency is forgotten.

Once the by-laws are revised and ready, they are ratified in a general assembly of the department (some minor revisions could come up in the ratification GA). Make sure the quorum you set out in your by-laws (to be ratified in this GA) is met in the GA itself. The key to having enough people in the GA is to do proper outreach (see mobilization section below).

During the mobilization, make sure certain members of the association (department or faculty) are willing to take up the responsibility of being on committees (executive and otherwise) and to be accountable to the membership. It is preferable to have an executive structure without hierarchy.⁵

If the creation of the association and its elections are well advertised, the election of the executives and other committee members can be held at the GA itself. It could also take place during a GA at a later date.

3.2 Method 2: Through a General Assembly

³ The terms constitution and by-laws are used interchangeably in Quebec. No matter what they are called, only one document is used as a master guideline for the way associations are run.

⁴ For a detailed example see Geograds (Geography Planning and Environment, graduate-level departmental association) by laws. <http://geograds.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/geograds-by-laws.pdf> (accessed Oct. 22, 2012).

⁵ For an example of student association and its structures, see <http://www.sogecom.org/page/instances>. (accessed Oct 22, 2012).

The GA is called by the mob squad and it is made very clear (in the mobilization material as well as in class visits, etc.) that the association structure will be created in the GA, along with other business.

A committee is voted on to write the by-laws and present at the next GA. An interim executive (a group of people) is also voted into place in order to follow up on the tasks adopted during the GA until by-laws are created and a formal association is in place. In this case, it is the GA that mandates the creation of an association via a by-law committee.

This process is interesting (as long as you can hold a GA with, say, from 1% to 5% of the membership) because the initiative to create the by-laws and the association comes from the members themselves and not only from the few people in the mob squad. This way, members take higher ownership and are more involved in the process as well as in the association itself.

3.3 Method 3: Through a petition

This method is mostly used for calling a GA when an association already exists but when they are so-called “party associations” – that is, either apolitical and not actively defending the rights of their membership or overly politicized to the detriment of the broader membership. Thus, this method is more to revive an existing association. Note, however, that this method can also be used to call a GA and then create an association as discussed in the above section.

Petitions are good for a number of reasons, whether it be to call a general assembly or to demand an action. They allow students to get involved in an active way from the moment a member of the mob squad gets in touch with them. By signing their name onto the petition, a member is implicitly committing to action. For a GA, this is what you need, so the petition approach for a GA can be a good means of insuring well-attended GAs! Evidently, signing the petition does not mean they will automatically attend the GA. Dedicated mobilization is still important (see the section on mobilization below).

Write a petition explaining the situation (austerity, for example) and why you would like to create an association. Depending on the existing by-laws or other rules, a certain number of members (quorum) need to sign a petition to make it valid or have value. Normally, a quorum or a slightly higher number of signatures is required. In the absence of a set quorum, aim for 1% to 5% of the membership.

The petition is a golden chance to stop a passer-by in the hallways or to enter a classroom to talk to students. Refrain from putting petitions on a website to get signatures, as it increases the chance of passivity. The online option could work only in the situation when only aim is to collect signatures and ascertain the symbolic support. The petition method is effective, particularly if there is an active and eager mob squad to get the numbers and do the talking.

4 Outreach / Mobilization

4.1 Creating mobilization material

It is important to create flyers/pamphlets/posters with all of the relevant GA information; however, no need to spend much time on making the information material (most of the time and resources should ideally be spent in talking to people!). Resources exist that allow anyone without expertise in design software to put together information material.⁶

Collect background information from existing resources or research basic information so that you can distribute leaflets/pamphlets to people for an in depth understanding of issues.

4.2 Mobilization tips

One-on-one mobilization: this is **THE MOST** important way to mobilize! Sit or stand patiently with people in your department. Discuss the context and importance of the political conjuncture, austerity measures and the upcoming GA. Listen to their personal concerns and interests. Encourage them to take an active role in organizing their GA and creating their association. Only in rare cases is mobilization a numbers game. Meeting with less people is preferable if meaningful and empowering discussion is held. Encourage people to talk to others!

Flying: make sure you say a phrase or two about why you are holding the event (the GA, a speaking event, a meeting, etc.) as you give out the flyer. This is another occasion to have a one-on-one chat about the issue at hand!

CLASS visits! This is one of the most important aspects of mobilization, as you can speak to a class full of people at once. Here is one suggested way of proceeding:

- Draft a document with the course listings for the entire week in your department. This should include the course name, time, location, professor name and a column to insure that someone visits each class (ex. individual names can be listed next to each class).
- Go 5-10 minutes before the class starts;
- Ask/inform the professor that you are going to make an announcement, and that you need a minute or two to do so;

⁶ Posters and flyers can be downloaded from this sharing based Quebec students' website <http://www.latotale.info/> and modified as per your need. The site can also serve as a source of inspiration! For other samples, also see <http://www.stopthehike.ca/materiel-dinformation-2/depliants/> and <http://concordiastudents.ca/material-2/>

- Pass a sign-up sheet or petition in the classroom before or after the announcement depending on how many students already know about the cause. It is also nice to have materials to hand out (flyers, symbols, stickers, etc.)
- Finish the announcement with an invitation of comments or questions;
- If announcing an event (GA etc), make sure to write the key info (date, time and place) on the black board before stepping out.

Poster: put them up everywhere! Most importantly, put them in places where students remain and wait for long time, such as areas around elevators, near queues for meals, inside bathrooms, etc. Cluttered spaces or spaces of transition are not likely to grab your attention.

Tabling: tabling can be very useful, particularly during times of high campus mobilization. You want a table placed prominently on campus or in the department with a large and clear sign identifying the table. Things to have at a table: Sign-up sheets and a pen, key information and dates, flyers, tape, string, etc. All of these materials can be put in a “tabling box” readily available for any mob squad member to table.

The table can be the hub for class visits! The class schedules can be placed at the table where people can sign up for speaking at a class. The person tabling can, thus, coordinate the class visit.

Flash mobs: creative flash mobs are a great way to attract attention! While one group engages in the flash mob, have a few individuals designated to engage in conversation with people passing by and to hand out flyers.

Make a video: make a video that can be shared on facebook or other media depending on what your constituency is into. Engineering students will want to see familiar faces, and so on.

Banner drops: you know the deal! A really good banner drop would inspire some sense of awe. Be bold, be visible. Giving flyers to people as they pause to look at the banner would be strategic.

Speaker session: invite a professor (or anyone else who would draw a crowd) to give a talk at lunch or some other time on the topic of austerity or a relevant issue. You can then, or perhaps even your invitee can, speak to students about the upcoming GA or other events.

5 Holding a General Assembly

The department or faculty-wide GA would ideally be the highest decision-making body of the department or faculty student association. Ultimately, this means that it is the students themselves who make decisions, and not a handful of people (elected executives or any other committees) who do so on their behalf. Having a set of by-laws allows the association to follow a set of clear guideline.

Election of a facilitator and the secretary by the members themselves helps ensure unbiased proceedings. The amendment and approval of the agenda by members allows the membership to bring the issues that are important to them to the table, making the GAs relevant to the members.

In order to save time in this process, however, the first item of the agenda for your first GA could simply be to vote on a committee that will draft bylaws for the next GA. Another item could be to designate a couple of people to follow up on any tasks and mandates voted in the GA.

If it is the first general assembly and it is being organized in a short timeframe, priority should be given to mobilizing. The association can then be formalized in subsequent weeks (method 2 or 3 above for creating the student association). Discussing by-laws and constitutional matters at the first GA could turn out to be discouraging and uninspiring. The key is stressing that these documents are nevertheless vital and can be developed over time. For the smooth functioning of the GA, however, a set of basic rules would be required.⁷

Make sure the GA is consultative, allowing students to express their concerns and instigating debate and discussion.

5.1 General Assembly preparation

Many of the key mobilization points were addressed above. A few additional logistical points to consider:

Room bookings: it may be difficult to estimate the turnout of a GA, particularly the first one! This really depends upon the level of mobilization and awareness leading up to the GA. Be sure to book and confirm a sufficiently sized room well in advance. Look at department course schedules and attempt to pick a time that is accessible for most people in the department.

⁷ See Special by-laws (last section) of the Geograds (Geography Planning and Environment, graduate-level departmental association) by laws. <http://geograds.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/geograds-by-laws.pdf>. Accessed Oct. 22, 2012.

Also see basic rules (adapted Robert's Rules of Order) for running a smooth meeting at GSA Concordia (how exactly does a general assembly work?): <http://gsaconcordia.ca/information-2/rights-and-history/general-assembly-what-exactly-is-that/>. Accessed Oct 22, 2012.

Technology and materials: depending on the size of the GA, certain technologies may be necessary (projectors, computers, microphones, speakers, screens, outlets, power bars, extension cords). Make sure relevant material is printed and available on a table at the entrance of the room (voting cards, secret ballot cards – just in case needed, propaganda materials, etc.)

It is good to have the minutes visibly displayed on a projector so that people can collectively agree upon the wording of motions and so on. This is always the preferable method.

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 conjuncture (ex. austerity measures, tuition, program closure, etc.)
6. Motions/propositions (often comes out of the discussions)
7. Next GA
8. Adjournment