



# NDSA

## ORGANIZING HANDBOOK

Prepared by the Civic Engagement Task Force on April 24th, 2020



# Civic Engagement Task Force

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### INTRODUCTION

“There is strength in numbers” is an old phrase, but it contains a lot of truth. If a hall government is hosting a game night in the residence hall lobby, the event will be a greater success if more residents of that hall show up and participate. If the state legislature is considering cuts to a successful scholarship program, it will take a substantial amount of students communicating with their representatives and showing up at the State Capitol to save—or even expand—that program. When more students are involved, they have a stronger collective voice and power. This document was designed to help student leaders like you turn this old phrase into new actions.

The bulk of this document covers specific case studies of real, student-led initiatives. We hope that these cases may teach you valuable lessons or spark new ideas that you can apply to your own projects requiring student engagement. In particular, this document focuses on getting students more involved with student government, politics, their own communities, and other student organization initiatives.

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### I. MAKING ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS SUCCESSFUL AND COLLECTING VALUABLE FEEDBACK

*You might be thinking about starting an initiative on your campus that will impact a significant amount of the student population. There's a lot that can go into gaining the support you need to ensure your initiative gets off the ground and is successful long-term. The following case study provides insight into how one Student Senator turned a somewhat taboo idea for a senate bill into a successful campus-wide program that continues to expand.*

In the 2018-19 academic year, Matthew Ternus, a Student Senator for the College of Education and Human Development at the University of North Dakota, identified a problem: there was a lack of access to menstrual products on campus. He believed Student Government had access to the resources and connections necessary to address this problem and began to devise a plan for installing dispensers of free menstrual products in various bathrooms across campus. In the early stages, he spoke with the Student Body Vice President and the Student Government Advisor/Associate Dean of Students to see if his idea was feasible and learn about other resources on campus. After being told it would be an uphill battle, he pushed forward and assembled a core group of Student Government members to gather student feedback and write a bill. Matthew believed having broad student support for this program was important, so he met with various student organizations on campus, including the Association of Residence Halls (along with its individual Hall Governments) and Greek Houses. During this period, he was able to talk with a wide array of students about this program and receive immediate positive feedback on how to better tailor it to student needs. Matthew also encouraged students be actively engaged with the weekly Student Senate meetings that were livestreamed on Facebook.

The bill process for UND's Student Senate takes two weeks: For the first week, the bill is introduced and debated on. The second week consists of further debate and then a vote. While introducing this program to Student Senate, Matthew essentially made this argument: By providing free menstrual products via dispensers to students on campus, this would 1) boost accessibility for these products on campus, 2) provide financial relief for those who might not be able to afford said products, and 3) add UND to a growing list of colleges and universities across the country that provide this same service. There were many concerns raised about how sustainable the program would be and how much support there would be across campus.

During the week following his bill's introduction, Matthew set out to address some of the concerns surrounding the program. He met with Facilities Management and reached an agreement that they would handle stocking the dispensers as long as the products were not being misused or improperly disposed of. Matthew also spoke with a company called AuntFlow to secure discounts on the products needed to stock the dispensers.



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With this new information, Matt’s team went into the second round of debate with a lot of energy. They went in with an initial request for 5 dispensers and 1,000 pads and tampons per dispenser and came out with an amendment to add an additional 4 dispensers and matching product. Thus, the bill known as The Access to Menstrual Products on Campus (TAMPonCAMPUS) was passed. As the dispensers went out, a QR code was attached for students to scan and provide feedback on a survey. This feedback process created a buy-in for students whose opinions (on topics such as where the best locations would be for the dispensers) shaped a future expansion bill.

For the next academic year, Matthew was elected as the Student Body Vice President. He recognized this program’s success and wanted to see it become a fundamental part of campus. He had a meeting with Facilities Management, Student Health Services, and two other student leaders on campus to discuss new funding models and the potential for expansion in 2019-20 academic year. He used the momentum from this meeting to form a partnership with Student Health and secure a commitment of \$5,000 per year towards the program. Additionally, the Association of Residence Halls agreed to fund a bulk order of products for the dispensers. After the Student Senate meeting during which the expansion bill was passed, the Student Government Advisor told Matthew this: “You all have successfully normalized a conversation that, I’ll be honest, started with snickers in the back of the room.”

#### Key Takeaways

- **Identify key student organizations and organize with as many student groups as possible**
  - Hall Governments, Residence Hall Associations, and Greek Houses are often great groups to reach out to as their membership spans large amounts of students and they are usually familiar with getting programs implemented themselves.
- **Seek out institutional partnerships**
  - By partnering with Student Health Services, Matthew secured a long-term commitment of a substantial sum of money. This can make a huge difference in both getting an initiative off the ground and making it sustainable for years to come.
- **Ensure you have support from key actors**
  - UND Facilities Management agreed to manage the inventory for the dispensers after a conversation addressing their concerns. There are often many moving parts to campus-wide initiatives and it is crucial that you are aware of everything



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involved and bring the necessary people on board. This can make or break your initiative.

- **Use a balance of modern and traditional solutions for collecting feedback**
  - Every student with a smartphone can easily scan a QR code and get taken right to a survey. This is a simple, passive way of collecting feedback from students who want their voices heard; however, you will likely not get responses from enough students this way. It is important to go *to* students and have face-to-face conversations about their concerns and ideas. This will bring out more developed responses and give you a better idea of what the student population as a whole might feel about your initiative.
- **Maintain good working relationships**
  - For initiatives like this, success will be determined partly on its longevity. Matthew continued having conversations with student leaders, administrators, and others as he transitioned into his new role as Student Body VP. His efforts kept the windows open for more funding and even expansion of the program.

## II. UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTIVELY AND BOOSTING EVENT TURNOUT

*It's no secret that social media is an invaluable tool for communicating with your target audience; the problem is you can't just create an account, make a post, and expect success. Especially for initiatives that involve hosting events, effective social media use is vital. The following case study details the efforts on one North Dakota campus to host a wide variety of consistently successful events.*

### Overview

At Minot State University, there is a student-oriented organization called MSU Life that is leading the charge in creating, organizing, and implementing events for students. They put on two or three events every week totaling over 100 events over the course of each school year. MSU Life's leadership consists of a director who is not presently a student and is employed full-time and three student coordinators who are employed part-time. The director has final decision-making power and supervises the coordinators. The coordinators spearhead event planning, emceeing, and primary management of social media accounts. Leadership meets at least every week to plan basic operations. MSU Life also consists of 50 student members who are involved in a number of ways to ensure the events are successful and fine-tuned to student interests. The primary role of each student member is to brainstorm ideas for future events. One brainstorming session led to the very popular Casino Night event. Once ideas have been formulated, student members help promote the events and assist with hosting the events. Student members also gather feedback from past events to see what things worked and what things need to be changed in future events.

Once or twice every month during the school year, a large meeting is held for all MSU Life members. At this meeting, there is a team bonding activity to build positive working relationships amongst the members. Afterwards, organizational business is conducted, including discussions on student feedback, planning for future events, brainstorming



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sessions, and performance reviews for the organization as a whole on event execution and outreach.

### Challenges and Successes

MSU Life’s goal is to promote and support the campus community as a whole; however, this can be a challenge if students are not interested in the events being planned, the events are held at a time when many students have scheduling conflicts, or if the students simply aren’t aware of the events.

“Enticing students to attend events is a challenge when we are on campus AND virtually. Students lead very busy lives so to get them to pause and attend an event takes a lot of buy-in. We spend a lot of time promoting events in creative ways to get students to notice what we’re offering”

Aaron Hughes, MSU Life Director

One of the most effective ways that MSU Life addresses this challenge is by making daily social media posts on a variety of platforms. This consistent level of content output helps build a following for the social media accounts. Examples of posts include advertisements for upcoming events, general holiday celebraton posts, periodic giveaways, and posts simply asking for feedback. At the time of writing, MSU Life’s advertising efforts have been so effective that they have cultivated a huge following of thousands of students on each account and are one of the primary organizations for event advertisements for the campus.

In order to generate interest for the events, MSU Life tries to provide food at as many events as possible. The organization also often conducts giveaways at the events. The prizes are usually tailored to the type of event. One of the biggest events on campus, Bingo, is largely successful because of the allure of winning prizes that are very popular among students. Flatscreen TVs, modern gaming consoles, wireless earbuds, and smartwatches draw in an average of 200 students per event (sometimes getting up to over 400).



Another series of events that has had overwhelming success is the “Pinterest” nights which is an arts and crafts themed event with supplies provided by MSU Life.



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MSU Life has had to grapple with a major challenge of event planning: many of their events appealed to specific demographics of students which left large swaths of the student population untouched. To fix this—and develop a more inclusive environment—MSU Life has spent time and energy working on ideas for new events, such as the aforementioned Casino Night, various movie nights, and events with outsider vendors like comedians, magicians, and hypnotists. The organization relies upon gathering good feedback from students to drive their decision-making.

*Note:* During the development of this case study in the spring 2020 semester, the COVID-19 pandemic was underway. This brought about significant challenges to hosting events because of social distancing guidelines and the transition of all in-person classes to online. Fortunately, MSU Life has been able to leverage its large social media following to continue communicating with students and begin hosting virtual events. A Bingo event that was originally scheduled to be hosted on-campus ended up being a huge success online with a turnout of 169 students. Future virtual events that have been confirmed include Trivia Night, 500 Ways to Win, and an Escape Room-like game. Additionally, MSU Life made structural changes to the organization: Five committees were formed—each chaired by the director or a coordinator—to ensure MSU Life could still carry out events for Minot State students in the face of the on-campus closure. The committees include the Virtual Events Committee, the TikTok Committee, the Twitter Committee, the Wellness Committee, and the Team Bonding Committee.

#### Key Takeaways

- **Don't be afraid to experiment with the unconventional**
  - Although having 50 members involved in the decision-making process may sound ineffective, the large number gives MSU Life the capacity to maintain a consistent output of events in touch with the wants and needs of the Minot State student body.
- **Cultivate powerful organizational assets**
  - MSU Life's large social media following has led to huge success with events on Minot State's campus, but it might now be the sole reason for its ability to host successful events online.
- **Have food or prizes at your event**



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- College students always love free food—it can be delicious and give them a break financially. Good prizes are also really effective if you can afford to offer them.
- **Prioritize gathering feedback**
  - Staying in touch with what students are thinking will allow you to tailor your events and social media posts in the most appealing ways to maximize turnout and interaction.
- **Be adaptable**
  - Some may have thought that the transition to online classes would have ended all campus events for the rest of the semester, but MSU Life has proven that creativity and a little effort can overcome some of the most daunting challenges.
- **Be consistent**
  - Through consistent posting on social media platforms and more-than-weekly event hosting, MSU Life has developed a level of trust and reliability with its following of students. Although it takes effort, students appreciate this consistency in their otherwise busy and hectic lives and increases the chances that they will take advantage of the events being held.
- **Be inclusive**
  - By not leaving big sections of the student population out, you will be able to maximize turnout and establish a more appealing environment for students to enjoy themselves.

### III. ENGAGING STUDENTS FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTIVISM

*Sometimes, the best—and only—way to achieve your goal is through a change that must be made by the state legislature. The following case study describes efforts to secure funding for a new academic building.*

#### Overview

In 2009 and 2011, flooding in Valley City convinced its residents of the need for lasting flood protection in the city. As part of Phase I of that process, permanent levees were strategically constructed along the Sheyenne River. One long stretch of the flood wall was built in front of Foss Hall, a music building at Valley City State University. This meant that the building was technically condemned and could not exist behind the flood wall due to the threat of flooding, so VCSU needed funding to build a new academic building in the protected zone.

Heading into the 2019 legislative session, VCSU sought the necessary funding for a new Communication and Fine Arts Building to replace Foss Hall. There was an early impression that only one building would receive funding and be cleared for construction. They had to ensure their capital project was prioritized in the face of other schools that also had important projects to push. Without legislative funding, VCSU would have to consider alternate sources of money, such as intensive private fundraising or increasing tuition for students.



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VCSU organized a campus delegation to represent the institution at the state legislature and make its case for why funding was needed. Members of Student Senate who were available joined the trip, and Student Senate as a whole nominated faculty, staff, and other interested students to go with. They also brainstormed ideas for alumni they could reach out to who'd best represent their school and community. In total, 25 people participated in this lobbying trip, including three students heavily involved in the university and its programs, seven Student Senate representatives, seven faculty and staff, and eight community members—many being alumni. Some of the VCSU representatives who provided testimony at the legislative session include the then-class president and alumni.

In the end, \$32 million in funding was granted to VCSU to construct a new building to house its music, art, and communications programs. Once construction has been completed, every student will have a minimum of two classes in the building for VCSU's general education program.

#### Reflections

Reflecting on their lobbying efforts, the people involved thought that choosing a mixed approach of VCSU representatives (including students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members) was effective in demonstrating to legislators the need for a new Fine Arts Building from a variety of perspectives. In order to make their lobbying even more effective, they wished they had set up an application process for people to send in their arguments and then choose the most important ones for testimony. This would have fine-tuned their arguments and possibly kept lawmakers' focus on their most convincing points.



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#### IV. HELPFUL LINKS

- Further reading on MSU Life:  
 “MSU Life, Office of International Programs continue to support students” *Minot State University*. 10 Apr 2020 [www.minotstateu.edu/pio/news/2020/04/MSU-Life,-Office-of-International-Programs-continue-to-support-students.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3Mq-kS\\_nzxdX5qK81-vUnM1V5\\_PLkj2mteGuTngB6eHA3FWUz02pKdmuc](http://www.minotstateu.edu/pio/news/2020/04/MSU-Life,-Office-of-International-Programs-continue-to-support-students.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3Mq-kS_nzxdX5qK81-vUnM1V5_PLkj2mteGuTngB6eHA3FWUz02pKdmuc)  
 Rizzazi, Taylor. “Minot State University organization promotes fun and positivity through online events” *Nexstar Media Group Inc.* 10 Apr 2020 [www.kxnet.com/news/local-news/minot-state-university-organization-promotes-fun-and-positivity-through-online-events/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook\\_KX\\_News\\_Minot&fbclid=IwAR3Dxusljan1mrWpbY3yv\\_S9KuX8MXnpAtv8S2mvxkVOp4zyOWkLsfUsk2w](http://www.kxnet.com/news/local-news/minot-state-university-organization-promotes-fun-and-positivity-through-online-events/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook_KX_News_Minot&fbclid=IwAR3Dxusljan1mrWpbY3yv_S9KuX8MXnpAtv8S2mvxkVOp4zyOWkLsfUsk2w)  
[www.facebook.com/msu.life/](http://www.facebook.com/msu.life/)  
[www.instagram.com/msu\\_life/](http://www.instagram.com/msu_life/)
- Further reading on the #TAMPonCAMPUS bill:  
 Ternus, Matthew et al. “The Access to Menstrual Products on Campus” *University of North Dakota*. 27 Feb 2019 [und.edu/student-life/student-government/\\_files/docs/student-senate/18-19/sb1819-13revised.pdf](http://und.edu/student-life/student-government/_files/docs/student-senate/18-19/sb1819-13revised.pdf)

#### V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REVISION

The Civic Engagement Task Force had an enjoyable and productive time developing the first iteration of this Organizing Handbook; however, *it is only version 1.0*. It is our hope that future members of NDSA continue to revise and update this document as students continue to encounter unique obstacles and discover new strategies for organizing. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, effective online organizing will be crucial to the success of any new student initiative. There will undoubtedly be students who find creative solutions to these problems, and NDSA needs to take note of this resourcefulness and use it to equip other students across the state with the strategies they need to be successful.

Here are some recommendations for future revisions of this document:

- **Identify new potential case studies**
  - The three initial case studies in this document certainly do not cover everything there is to the art and science of organizing students. You may come across insightful new initiatives by students leaders that hold strong potential for teaching other students important and useful lessons; these should be added to this document. Don’t be afraid to update the existing case studies as well—or remove them entirely if they are no longer useful.
- **Add a section on voting**
  - The importance of voting—especially in state and local elections—is not something everyone understands. By adding a section that talks about the importance of and strategies for promoting voter turnout, it may prove to be



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very beneficial in building a student voting bloc powerful enough to make public officials prioritize the issues facing students.

- **Include more of a focus on off-campus students**
  - Although many of the takeaways in the case studies can be applied directly to students living off-campus, this demographic is often harder to reach than on-campus students. Readers of this document might appreciate more help on this front.
- **Create a task force to carry out the revisions**
  - This document was crafted by members of the Civic Engagement Task Force. Its membership included a Chair, a Vice Chair, a Secretary, and a coalition of students representing institutions across the state. The task force gave students interested in getting more involved with NDSA a chance to gain leadership experience and contribute to the students of North Dakota. Its members provided diverse perspectives on the content and focus of the document, and they heightened NDSA's capacity for conducting case study research.
- **Maintain consistency of design and professionalism**
  - A professional looking document with consistent design elements increases ease of reading and will keep the reader's attention on the important content.
- **Ensure there are no grammatical or spelling errors**
  - This may seem like a minor point, but readers do pick up on these types of mistakes which can undermine whatever message you are trying to send.
- **Keep links updated**
  - The internet is constantly changing. Websites constantly go through structural overhauls or shut down entirely. This means that many of the links used in this document may be "dead" and don't work anymore. It is important to update or throw out these links during every revision process.