



# GRASSROOTS GUIDE: NAVIGATING TURNOVER IN ACTIVIST GROUPS

*This guide is a compilation of grassroots knowledge intended for grassroots activists. It was developed as a rapid response to a question raised by organizers, and so it applies a more simplified editing and vetting process before publishing. The thoughts included in this guide come from existing organizer databases and pre-developed resources on related topics, and in many instances these guides also contain direct insight from grassroots organizers themselves. Please feel free to share this around with other justice-oriented activists. You can download this (look under File menu top left) in several formats or link to it / [embed it](#) on a web page.*

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## Disclaimer / request for your help

This is a work in progress that is meant to evolve over time with input from organizers. At the moment, the tips and ideas here reflect the voices of the [contributors/reviewers listed below](#). We are always looking to add more voices of campaigners that have knowledge and experience on this topic. If this is you, please contact us here: [blueprintsfc@gmail.com](mailto:blueprintsfc@gmail.com).

## Summary

Grassroots groups, and especially student-led groups, face a high risk of dissolving, which creates challenges in momentum building. This is the result of an inability to pass along the group's resources and knowledge to the next generation of student organizers, as many lack a permanence of structure. More specifically, student groups struggle with the changes outlined by their school's semesters and length of studies. Frequent turnover provides campus organizers with a unique opportunity to map the natural 3-4 year cycle of a student organizer onto a timeline. These challenges can be avoided, and opportunities used, by strategizing before turnover happens.

We outline some of these strategies in the following guide, developed using resources from existing organizer databases, insight from the [Climate Justice Organizing HUB's](#) (aka 'HUB') community of practice, and direct insight from student organizers that took part in a learning circle on navigating turnover. *\*Note that insight provided from the learning circle is italicized throughout.* This guide includes; challenges faced by student organizers, strategies to support and guide new members and building institutional memory, plus further insight on student organizing best practices, organizing in a pandemic, wellbeing and motivation and recruitment and retention strategies.

## Challenges faced

The following experiences were shared by [HUB](#) learning circle participants. They portray some consequences of not being ready for student turnover:



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- *Divestment organizers were concerned about groups who won and didn't know where to go from there*
- *Groups have been struggling to navigate online organizing*
- *There are ongoing concerns related to general turnover and capacity when students graduate (particularly those who have been members of a group for a while)*
- *A lack of support from former members leads to more energy and time needed to restart after a high rate of turnover.*
- *Anger towards the school administration leads to forgetting about turnover periods, thus the workload for the next semester is larger.*

## Strategies for navigating turnover

### Support and guide new members: training and upskilling

[HUB director Jacqueline Tam on 'the buddy system'](#):

Many groups navigate turnover by pairing new members with someone who has more experience. This strategy encourages relationship building and offers a point of contact for new members to go to with their questions. Your group can do this in a number of ways:

- Make being a 'buddy' to new members a specific role in your group;
- Allow new members to choose their buddy;
- Partner new members with existing members based on their area of interest. For example, if a new member is interested in communications, pair them with the communications bottom-liner.

It's important that those assigned to be buddies have a strong sense of the group's identity and activities. Their role is to make themselves replaceable by training new members and activating potential leaders.

Older members can shadow new members. They can assist until the person feels comfortable doing the task at hand alone with minimal support from the older member.



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## [HUB Advisor Amara Possian on training/skilling up:](#)

In order to have a sustainable student group, **veteran members** need to take on the responsibility of building leadership and supporting people to learn and grow. If you are building leadership and supporting people to learn/grow at every step, then this situation is much easier to navigate. Churches are really good at this. I've read a couple of books about how they grow and this approach to training an apprentice comes from a book called [Exponential](#):

- I do. You watch. We talk.
- I do. You help. We talk.
- You do. I help. We talk.
- You do. I watch. We talk.
- You do. Someone else watches.

Veteran members need to invite new people to do tasks that were taken care of by older members (i.e. speak to the media).

## **Build institutional memory**

Having a strong base of institutional memory ensures the sustainability of your group by orienting new members when they join. A lack of institutional memory can lead to role confusion, lost vision, and copycat actions, as described by [Inside Higher Ed](#). Thus, building institutional memory as part of your strategic organizing practices helps new members thrive.

## **Create a blueprint for group operations**

Create a document that includes all the information that someone entering a new role would need to be successful.

Be sure to include:

- Essential responsibilities
- Best practices and general tips
- Passwords
- Contacts (internal and external ; include roles and resources linked to each contact)



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- Brief how-to explainers (tasks, school boards, permission to publish on school boards, creating pamphlets, printing posters)
- For Divest Campaigns: board of directors document with pictures/names/information to familiarize with the targets

## Have strong onboarding and outboarding processes

The [HUB](#)'s community of practice shared content suggestions for onboarding, which included:

- An overview of the group's mission, values, and structure
- Introductions to key group members
- Opportunities for questions
- A concrete action or next step for prospective members (i.e. ask them to join an action, invite them to the next meeting, or plan a social activity)

The community of practice also suggested outboarding include:

- Requesting feedback from outgoing members on ways to improve the group (i.e. a google form, a meeting)

## Topics related to turnover that emerged from the learning circle

- Student organizing best practices
- Organizing in a pandemic
- Wellbeing and motivation
- Recruitment and retention suggestions

## Student organizing best practices

Participants from the [HUB](#)'s learning circle on student group turnover expressed the following ideas (italicized when quoted):

### Institutionalize involvement

- *We've been trying to give university credits for participation in activism. We're connecting our actions to some curriculum.*
- *One of the things we did was to target the leaders of different groups on campus (i.e. President of the Communications club). We promoted our campaign as an opportunity for people to gain experience in organizing.*



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## Engage with the student association/body

- *As student executives, you have a short period of organization. There is a lack of connection between the student body and the board body. We need to hold our student representatives accountable. There is a disconnect between what the admin does, what the association does, and what the student body does. Universities are not really democratic, and student associations are not listened to enough. Students don't want to get involved in their association because they think it doesn't represent them... but to create a real student democracy and get the gains we want, we need students to invest in their association.*

## Get teachers to support your campaign(s)

- *Contact your faculty's student association directly before proposing that professors support the campaign. If the association supports, it will be easier to get the information you need (for example, if there are exams during an action). If emails don't work (no response), go directly to their students during their classes (with a nice smile!)*
- *Professors may also hold institutional memory that they can pass along to students*

## Outline institutions in your school

- *It would be helpful for groups to outline how boards, senate etc. at the university work, to provide this info for incoming members.*

## Get support from staff unions

- *Go to the teachers' unions to get more support for the campaign. Also, you can talk to the unions of support staff on campus. In the case of Occupy for example, the union was in solidarity with the students, so the process of taking down tents and things occupying the space was longer.*

## Create solidarity with staff causes



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- *Combine your cause with things that faculty support. Create solidarity between the student body and faculty (Divest campaigns can be tied to faculty pension funds, for example). Talk to more progressive faculty who might be able to provide insight on the history of the student movement on campus.*

## Organizing in a pandemic

Participants from the [HUB](#) learning circle explained they have taken on more responsibility since the beginning of the pandemic. Related experiences they shared about this included:

- *Increased feelings of isolation*
- *Felt good for their mental health to get involved*
- *Online commitments were difficult, and there was no way to really celebrate wins*
- *Difficult to stay on top of concerns, resolve conflicts, connect with people's feelings online*

Participants suggested...

- *Make posts on social media inviting people to share whatever time they have to give and possible tasks you need support with. Invite people to larger meetings.*
- *When you have designated positions, it's helpful to have an email for the position rather than contacting the personal email of the person who has that role.*

## Wellbeing and motivation

When asked about incorporating more social and fun activities to build relationships, learning circle participants suggested the following...

- *As someone who started a group during the pandemic, in my experience it was important to designate someone or a group to organizing social events. When people stopped coming to online social events, we included social time in the online meetings. People were demotivated from the online time, so we had to include it in the meetings.*
- *Have a different theme for each meeting (hat, pajamas...)*
- *Use interactive online tools to share thoughts*
- *Not exceeding meeting times so as not to exhaust people*



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- *Extended time for check-ins and check-outs with fun questions like “what plant do you feel like?”*
- *Connect through discussing emotions like shared frustrations and joys*
- *Holding actions without the pressure of going bigger, larger. Hold small actions and focus on the relationships that actions deepen. For example, an easy activity to organize is a banner drop with picture taking. The point is to gather people.*
- *Escalation of relationship building tactics: start by planning things like an email campaign or phone zap (no relationship building), then something like an open letter campaign, distributed and signed (opportunity to build relationships), and then organize a demonstration.*

## Recruitment and retention suggestions

Participants from the [HUB](#) learning circle shared the following ideas...

- *Taking over a space for recruitment! We took over space on campus for 3 days, so lots of community building and recruitment was achieved.*
- *X Divest group made a document to inform incoming members of who the board of directors (the targets) for their campaign were, complete with their names, photos and info on each. It helps new members plug in.*
- *Build relationships with new people. If there’s no response, take your time. Do not organize a meeting too soon after sending a message (allow people to free up their time). Mention an understanding for the lack of time of those who commit.*
- *At my university, we have the privilege of having a garden on campus. This was a big plus for students who wanted to come out and join us in the garden. An outdoor space helps with recruitment!*
- *In some schools, a bootcamp (3 day online intensive) to get people up to speed on information, and bring the information to new people, is helpful. The important thing is to keep the relationships!*

## Attribution and further resources

Input and resources for this guide were provided by:

- [Inside Higher Ed](#)



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- Student organizers that took part in the [Climate Justice Organizing HUB's](#) learning circle on navigating student turnover
- The [HUB's](#) community of practice (includes senior movement thinkers and other anonymous grassroots organizers)

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