

# Effective Campus Petition Drives: Best practices for a powerful organizing tool

(This has been adapted from an e-mail thread  
between two student organizers.)

Petitions are a powerful tool *only when* they are used to leverage further action. Unfortunately, petitions are often overused and misused. At worst, they lull signers into complacency by giving them the impression that they have “done something.” Organizers should *never* embark on a petition drive without having a solid plan for leveraging the strategic value of the petition signatures toward action. The goal of this document is to help organizers think through their plan for implementing and leveraging a petition drive.

## What are petitions good for?

### A. Meeting Constituents

A petition gives group members a *reason* to speak with a passer-by, a co-worker, or a community resident about an issue. Petitions are a non-threatening invitation for people to take a stand on an issue because it is a familiar tactic – meaning, it is within the comfort zone of most people to hear about an issue and either sign or decline, without being upset or coming away with a negative view of the group or the issue because of the petition.

### B. Generating Interest

In presenting the petition, group members are raising awareness and, hopefully, concern about the issue. Public education is a *big* part of petition drives – and some groups use them to tally how many people they have duly educated on their issue.

### C. Gauging Interest

In meeting constituents through a petition drive, groups can find out if they are targeting an issue that people really do care about – or don't. While group members get *practice* at using the arguments for the issue, they can learn how and why some arguments resonate while others don't.

### D. Recruiting

It is always worthwhile to let petition signers know about the next major campaign action – not a meeting, but an action! A few people will respond with enthusiasm, expressing an interest in becoming more involved. However, it is generally a waste of time and a turn-off to spin a recruiting pitch on every person who signs.

### E. Building a Base

Petitions can be used to collect contact information. At the end of a day gathering petition signatures, the group now has the name and perhaps phone number or email address of a lot

of people actually interested in the issue. These people are *NOT* members of the organization just because they signed a campaign petition, but they *CAN* be tactfully called upon to participate in a rally or other *action* (not a meeting) that further advances the issue.

#### F. Demonstrating Widespread Sentiment

This is only possible when the group has the ability to collect a large enough number of signatures to demonstrate to the targeted decision-maker that many people care about the issue – and that they agree with the crafted demand statements.

#### G. Presenting demands at a public forum

A stack of petitions amplifies the group's voice and increases the weight of the group's well-crafted demand statement when directly addressing a targeted decision-maker. Because the group has already demonstrated that it is speaking on behalf of a large number of signatories, the decision-maker cannot dismiss its remarks as reflecting the opinions of a passionate few.

### **Planning a petition drive**

#### **1) The Target Decision-maker**

The petition should be addressed and delivered to the person who actually has the authority to respond affirmatively to the petition demands. Without a particular target in mind and a specific plan for delivering them, the strength of the petition tactic will have been wasted.

The target must be a *person*, not an organization, committee, or institution. The goal is to apply pressure to the person who can deliver the outcome the group is organizing to achieve. This person may be an executive, a chair of a committee (the agenda-setter), or particular people casting critical swing votes. It is rarely everyone in a decision-making group because a full committee under fire will just commiserate with each other and then seek ways to ignore the demands. While petitions often target a lightning-rod “president,” there is often a lower-level decision-maker who has the authority to take action and may be a more effective target.

#### **2) The Demand Statement**

The word “petition” literally means a request, so the demand statement on the petition should clearly express the action the group is asking the targeted decision-maker to take.

Strong petitions clearly express a demand – and not just a position statement. Position statements can be used to demonstrate support, but they basically amount to weak one-question surveys. For example, a position statement might be, “I believe climate change is a serious issue the university should address.” The petition drive would be much stronger with a specific demand such as, “The University should commit to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 7% below 1990 levels by 2010 – as called for in the Kyoto Protocol.”

An effective demand statement will request an *action* (a commitment, a publicly accountable statement, a disclosure, a termination of a contract, etc...) to be taken by the targeted decision-maker.

Sometimes petitions have sets of demands. Crafting demand sets for coalitions can be challenging, and it is important to be sure that individual demands in the demand set do not conflict, and that they do reflect the sentiments of the *entire* coalition.

### **3) The Constituency**

Besides the demand, the petition needs to have a target base of signatories. What constituency will the target decision-maker care about the most? Sometimes universities are most sensitive to alumni signatories, for instance. However, it is always important to identify the constituents of the issue (financial aid campaigns = students, living wage campaigns = workers), and have the petition reflect the signatures of those affected by the issue along with allies that have influence in the institution.

### **4) The Goal**

How many signatures will the group have to collect for the targeted decision-maker to care? It's usually relative. If 600 out of 10,000 workers sign a petition, few bosses would care. If 3,000 sign in less than three days, well, then, the president has a problem to address.

Never set out without a goal *and* a deadline. Open-ended petition campaigns can sap a group's energy and kill morale. ("Are we done yet?" "No. Our plan is to petition forever until we die of exhaustion – or graduate.") Why a deadline? There are two reasons a petition drive needs a deadline. First, sometimes a group gets into a petition campaign and realizes it set its goal too high. In this case, the goal is no longer the light at the end of the tunnel that keeps people going. The deadline ensures the petition drive has a point at which it will be finished regardless of whether or not the group meets the goal. The second reason a petition drive needs a deadline is because the group will want to be able to say to the target decision-maker, "We collected signatures for \_\_\_\_\_ amount of time to gauge community support... and \_\_\_\_\_ people signed up immediately! Just imagine if we were to keep on going!" This is where the idea of a petition blitz comes in...

### **4) The Approach**

How and where will the group engage the constituency it is organizing? Work out a plan that meets the group's goal with the organizing calories it has available.

One approach is a "petition blitz," which involves gathering several hundred signatures (representing, for example, 10% or 20% of the student body) in 24 hours! Working within this time frame, a group can say, "Look, 10-20% of the student body responded *immediately* to this issue – just think what we could do if we actually continued this petition campaign for the rest of the semester." (Because a group rarely has the organizing calories available to devote just to the petition drive for the whole semester, the blitz allows a group to have a similar impact without actually going the whole semester.)

Another benefit of the blitz is camaraderie. Identify a 24 hour period during which group members won't have a lot of tests, papers and other distractions. Have a big kick-off where the group gets together to fire each other up makes sure everyone is prepared, and then heads out in *pairs* to go dorm-room to dorm-room for a few hours (some call it "dorm-storming"). If 20 petition collectors each collect 50 signatures over a 2 hour period, the group will have 1,000 signatures in the first few hours! (Compare that to tabling!)

## 5) Preparing the group

### A. The Pitch

A "pitch" that is to-the-point will allow group members to speak with confidence and without rambling. The "pitch" should provide the context for the petition: Who, What, When, Where, Why.

Here's an example:

"Hi, have you heard about the Sugar Plum boycott? Farm workers face some of the worst working conditions in the United States. Right now, plum-pickers are demanding recognition for their right to bargain collectively for better conditions with the companies that buy the produce they pick. Unfortunately, the plum companies have refused to even meet with them, so they've called for a boycott of Sugar Plum Company because it is one of the largest and most influential companies that refuses to recognize farm workers' rights. We [group name] are collecting signatures for a petition that asks the University not to buy or sell Sugar Plum plums in campus stores and restaurants until Sugar Plum recognizes the workers' right to organize. Take a look... [Now you can pass them the clipboard and pen; don't just hold it out.] If this is something you agree with, please join us by adding your signature! If not, *that's totally okay*. We are just looking for students concerned about safe and healthy working conditions. – Thanks!"

The last three sentences of the above example are vital. If you've ever felt like you were pressuring people into signing your petition, it's probably because you didn't have these three sentences in your pitch. They take **all** the pressure out of the situation. If you take the pressure off, you will often find that more people sign up, and they feel better about doing it!

The last sentence is literal: you *are* looking for the people who agree. In a petition drive, there is no need to spend emotional energy on a person who wants to corner you in a contrarian debate. Definitely answer questions, but it is a good idea to set a limit on the amount of time and attention you are going to devote to any one individual signature (like 1 or 2 minutes).

### B. Answering Objections

Many people feel like they are pushovers if they sign a petition without asking at least one question, so prepare for the standard questions. If you don't know what the standard

questions are, then go out and test drive the petition for half an hour – you’ll find out pretty quickly!

Make up an “objections” sheet that lists common objections on one side and responses on the right. Here’s a sample:

What’s so bad about plum picker working conditions?	Farm laborers often work 12 hour days, six days a week, in extreme weather conditions and with insufficient access to water, bathrooms, nutrition and healthcare.
If it is so bad, why don’t they just get another job?	Many of them do. The turnover rate on farms is incredibly high. Ultimately, somebody has to pick our food, though. Wouldn’t you feel better knowing that the workers that pick your food have safe and healthy working conditions?

Review the objections and answers with the group and role play them. Having short, easy-to-remember, but well considered answers to common objections will allow group members to speak with confidence.

### C. The Signature Sheet

Here are some ideas for improving the petition sheet itself:

Idea #1: Put the petition title and demand statement at the top of each page.

Idea #2: Put 15 (or fewer) signature blanks per page.

Idea #3: Think carefully about what personal information you want to collect and why. Ask for that much information and nothing more.

Idea #4: Include information about how and to whom the signatures will be presented. If they will be posted on the internet, or read out loud, or printed in the school newspaper. Your signatories deserve to know.

Idea #5: Include a short list of organizations or important people that have also supported your cause.

Idea #6: Put a line at the bottom of each page for the signature collector to sign and date.

> See the sample signature sheet attached at the end of this document.

Let's think about these 6 ideas from the perspective of four groups:

*The Targeted Decision Maker:* "If someone presents me with a petition, saying there are 300 signatures on it, but it is only 3 pages thick, I'm not going to be impressed. More than likely, every signature is so small it is illegible and unverifiable. On the other hand, if somebody tosses a stack of petitions on my desk that is probably 30 pages thick and tells me there are 300 signatures on it, I'm more impressed. Especially because the printed names, signatures and e-mail addresses will probably be written with enough clarity that I can find a few names I know. And, the demand statement is at the top of each page, so there is no question each of these people knew what they were signing. I also know when and by whom each of these signatures were collected because they put their name, signature and date at the bottom of every page. Most uncomfortable of all, it said on each page that the petitions were going to be delivered to me. That means every person that signed is expecting action from me!"

*A Person Signing:* "When the person came by asking for my signature, she showed me the statement she was asking me to support, and I could tell exactly where to sign and what information to provide. I didn't feel confused by her showing me a statement and then handing me a different sheet to sign that was just full of signature blanks, without the statement on it. I was glad to see that it explained exactly how my signature was going to be used. And I hope our Student Government representatives join the Student Governments of 5 other schools that the petition noted have already passed similar resolutions."

*A Signature Collector:* "It felt really good to complete a page! And it only took 15 signatures to complete a page, so I was regularly starting a new one, which kept me motivated. (One time, I collected signatures for a petition that had 50 signature blanks per page and it felt like I was never making any progress, which killed my motivation.) Most importantly, the signature sheet didn't ask for any personal information beyond what was necessary. If anyone ever had an objection to a piece of information requested, I always knew exactly why it was necessary and could easily allay their fears. The same was true for people who were concerned about how their name was going to be used. Since it was all written on the sheet, I could just point it out and let them decide if they were comfortable with it."

*The Petition Organizer:* "People often feel like they can't turn in a signature sheet until it is full. When I ran a petition with 50 signature blanks per sheet, I know a lot of people never turned theirs in, even though they had collected more than 15 names. With only 15 names per sheet, I see people turning in their sheets early and often, which offers me a chance to give them encouragement and ensures that we don't have a lot of signatures that never get turned in."

## 6) Petition Kick-off

Every petition drive should begin with a kick-off, which consists of a few hours of concerted canvassing by a large number of people.

How do you recruit lots of collectors? *Personal invitations* made either in-person, over the phone or by direct e-mail are the *best* way to be sure that people show up.

Conducting an ice-breaker will help people get to know each other and find a good partner for their petitioning. (Sending people off to petition individually is like death to non-extroverted members of your group. Don't do it to them! Even for extroverts, feeding off of another person's energy will keep them going longer.)

Because some of your collectors may not have been involved in planning the petition drive, make sure to explain the context, the signature goal, the deadline and how the petitions will be delivered to the targeted decision-maker. *Allow for some question and answer time.* Signature collectors have higher confidence and enthusiasm when they feel like their questions have been answered or concerns addressed.

Role play the pitch for the group, and then have the group split into pairs and role play with each other. Come back together and *discuss how it went.* Role play some of the common objections and the answers to them. Have the group split into pairs and role play the objections and answers. Come back together and *discuss how it went.*

Once people choose their partners, divide up dorms or pieces of the campus between the partners. Do something to get everyone fired up before heading out.

### **Checklist: Kick-off Supplies**

- Copies of the petition signature sheet
- Copies of "the pitch"
- Copies of the answers to common objections
- Clipboards (optional)
- Stickers saying "I support \_\_\_\_\_" (optional)
  - These let people find out about the petition from people who've already signed it.
  - They can be easily made on a printer with mailing labels.
  - Putting a website address where people can go to sign up after a group member has passed by is a good idea.
- Any other fun goodies/gimmicks.
  - A pinwheel to carry for a wind power petition
  - A lump of coal for an anti-mountain-top-removal mining petition.

## **7) Keeping everyone updated on the petition drive's progress**

During the petition drive, people will be motivated by the progress of others. It is a good idea to schedule regular report-backs or sheet turn-ins in order to keep a running tally. When these report-backs happen, it is important that the tally be shared with everyone. Seeing the numbers increase

will give the group inspiration to keep on going. It is always great to recognize people for their hard work:

“Way to go, Joanne! She’s collected 100 signatures herself. Tell us, how did you do it?”

## **8) Presenting the petitions**

There are a lot of fun things that can be done to present the signed signature pages to the targeted decision maker (after they have been photocopied!). Presenting the petition is one of the last things the group will do, but how it does it is one of the first things the group should decide. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Present the stack of signatures when asking the student government to take action.
- Toss them across the desk during a meeting with the targeted individual in which the group is asking for action.
- Tape them all over the door and wall of the targeted individual’s office before business hours, beginning with a big sign explaining that the group collected that many signatures *in just 24 hours!*
- Have one student after another go into the targeted individual’s office and drop off one page at a time until all the pages have been dropped off. At a pace of one a minute, it will take half an hour to drop off a 30 page petition. That’s hard to ignore!
- Stand outside the individual’s office with a microphone and read off the signatures.
- Fax the pages to the individual, one every minute.
- Print them in an ad in the newspaper.
- Get a reporter to write a story about it.

