

# The Guide for **Student Advocates**

*to Build and Sustain Social Justice  
Campaigns, Movements, and Student-Led  
Movement Organizations*

## uCANRise

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**The proof  
that one truly  
believes is in  
action.**

— BAYARD RUSTIN



Authored by Max Lubin in Collaboration with uCANRise  
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In the 1960s, often considered the peak of college student activism, college affordability was a much smaller barrier to advocacy.

The average tuition and fees, not including room and board, in 1965 was \$607 per year at four-year universities, and \$203 for two-year colleges. College students as a whole were less pressured to work to support themselves and their parents and siblings. Today the reality of college affordability looks much different. Approximately 70% of students must work part- or full-time while enrolled in college. The reality that most students juggle classes, family responsibilities, and work means that new and creative types of advocacy are required to reach students and build successful movements.



Photo Credit: San Jose State University

College students on the quad at San Jose State University in 1961.

## Fighting for Change on Campus

During a spring semester at a college in Nashville, Tennessee, students began carrying signs around campus demanding change. They were protesting an oppressive college president who was limiting extracurricular activities, cutting athletic programs, and going so far as to cancel the student newspaper and magazine. In response to the protests, the president dispatched dozens of police officers to campus in a brutal attempt to arrest the student protestors for inciting a "riot." The police violence initiated another eight weeks of protests that culminated in the president's resignation.

While this story may sound like something unfolding on a college campus today, these protests at Fisk University occurred nearly 100 years ago. They were part of student protest movements at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)

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in the 1920s that also led to the ascent of the first African American president of Howard University in Washington, D.C.

The 1920s protests for racial justice at HBCUs are just one example of how student activism and particularly college student activism has shaped our nation. Activism hatched in dorm rooms and student unions across the nation has played a major role in the shaping of American culture and policy. From the Vietnam War protests and the formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s, to fighting South African Apartheid in the 1980s, every generation of students has shaped important outcomes for the future.

Students continue to protest and lead social movements to this day. However, after a brief look at the history of student movements, it is more accurate to describe student activists as shaping the present. Students know their campuses and communities best, better than any outside experts, and about how to build their own movements for change. With the right tools at their disposal, students can truly create a more fair and just world for themselves, for their communities, and for future generations.

# Student Activists in Action

Let’s take a look at some examples of different kinds of campaigns, organizations, and protests that can serve to inform students’ approach to building their own efforts. The following table summarizes some key features of the case studies we’ll present afterward.

**Table 1. Features of Case Study Organizations for Student Action**

TYPE	TIMING/ DURATION	EXAMPLE	FRAME/DEMAND	TACTICS
<b>Political Action Committee (PAC)</b>	Long-Term	Blue Future	Building a future where the progressive movement benefits from diverse young leaders.	Texting and calling voters in key districts, local teams for “sister” districts, connecting youth to closest swing district, developing on-campus progressive student organizations.
<b>Demonstration</b>	Short-Term	Cocks, Not Glocks	Challenging the Texas state decision to allow concealed handguns in college classrooms.	Distributing over 4,000 dildos (the brandishing of which is a Class C misdemeanor in Texas) to students to activate a campus-wide, women-led protest.
<b>Public Service</b>	Long-Term	Westwood Forward	Increasing quality of life for students on the UCLA campus and low-income residents of the campus-adjacent neighborhood of Westwood by leading revitalization efforts in an otherwise neglected area.	Lobbying to create a subsection of an existing neighborhood council so that a neglected area could attract increased student leadership and resources for equitable public planning.
<b>Electoral Campaign</b>	Long-Term	Rigel Robinson for City Council	By electing a UC Berkeley student to City Council for the campus’s district, students can inform equitable outcomes for key issues such as housing, food scarcity, and safety.	UC Berkeley student Rigel Robinson made a successful bid for Berkeley City Council, District 7, in 2018, running on a platform of, “Students deserve a seat at the table.”
<b>501(c)4</b>	Long-Term	Rise	Tuition hikes, campus hunger and homelessness, and overwhelming student loan debt put higher education out of reach for many students. Rise is needed to lead a movement to put college within reach for all.	Builds student-led advocacy campaigns, convenes and trains student leaders, partners with student groups to strengthen united advocacy work.
<b>501(c)3</b>	Long-Term	Swipe Out Hunger	While 1 in 3 college students faces food insecurity nationally, the stigma around being low-income and shut out from a communal space like the dining hall has kept the conversation out of mind for many college and dining administrators. Swipe Out is needed to bridge this gap.	Partners with colleges and universities to set up meal-swipe donations, authors legislation to support California campuses in anti-hunger efforts, grows Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach, and fights stigma related to college hunger.

## Political Action Committee (PAC): Blue Future

In 2018, Shadi Nasabzadeh, then a sophomore at American University in Washington, D.C., co-founded Blue Future, a youth-led, national organizing program run out of the Youth Progressive Action Catalyst, a youth-led political action committee (PAC). Blue Future engages, mobilizes, connects, and supports current high school and college students who are working on partisan political campaigns on behalf of progressive electoral campaigns. They provide a strong menu of support (from funding to tools) to other student organizations.

While Blue Future has been highly effective, there are significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles to establishing and maintaining a PAC. Nasabzadeh was able to get started with the help of established political organizations who also saw the deficit of opportunities for college students to access paid jobs on campaigns.

Two things set apart Nasabzadeh's experience building Blue Future from other organizations:

- 1** First, outside of College Democratic or Republican clubs, the vast majority of college student voting projects are nonpartisan. Although it is typically more challenging to establish entities like PACs, Blue Future empowers their students and supporters to directly endorse and support the candidates they favor. The ability for students to speak out directly in support of candidates strengthens their ability to follow up with candidates, once elected, to pursue policies that align with students' interests.
- 2** The second is their impact. Nasabzadeh and her team were able to recruit \$78,000 in grassroots and higher dollar contributions to support student organizers working in 20 of the nation's most competitive congressional districts in 2018. In 2020, Nasabzadeh and her team will prepare to grow their efforts across the nation.

**To learn more about Blue Future, visit <http://ourbluefuture.us/>.**

## Demonstration: Cocks, Not Glocks

"Fighting absurdity with absurdity" is the motto of Cocks, Not Glocks, a student demonstration at the University of Texas, Austin beginning in the fall of 2016. That year, the Texas legislature passed a law allowing gun owners to carry concealed weapons on campus, but state laws prohibited the display of sex toys as indecent. Jessica Jin, the protest's catalyst, used "Cocks, Not Glocks" as one of her platforms to challenge the status quo and change the conversation around guns, feminism, and sexuality by creating a Facebook event encouraging students to tie sex toys to their backpacks to protest the absurdity of the campus carry law as a joke. But when more than 34,000 students and community

**A PAC IS AN ORGANIZATION WHOSE MAIN PURPOSE IS TO RAISE AND DISTRIBUTE CAMPAIGN FUNDS TO CANDIDATES SEEKING POLITICAL OFFICE.**

In addition to directly supporting candidates, PACs may also spend their funds on what are termed independent expenditures. An independent expenditure is money that is spent on political advertising in support of or against a candidate and that comes from outside a candidate's own election organization. Independent expenditures are not campaign contributions and so are not subject to contribution limits, but they must be carefully tracked and meet reporting requirements. In fact, PACs are highly regulated and deeply scrutinized in general, so they must expressly follow the laws that they operate under.

**A DEMONSTRATION IS PUBLIC ACTION BY A LARGE GROUP IN FAVOR OR IN PROTEST OF A POLITICAL CAUSE OF CONCERN.**

Demonstrations have long served as a non-violent tactic, though they sometimes become violent engagements between protestors and police. They often consist of walking (often referred to as “marching”) in a mass formation from a beginning point to an end point, with rallies at either or both ends of the march. While some demonstrations are spontaneous, the demonstration is often a tactical choice by movements, forming part of a larger suite of resistance tactics. They are protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which specifically allows the freedom of assembly as part of a measure to facilitate the redress of such grievances, although in many areas government permission is required to hold a demonstration.

members shared the event page, Jin’s call to action attracted thousands of real-life supporters and media from across the nation.

The “Cocks, Not Glocks” protest was the single largest gun safety demonstration in Texas history, and was featured across national media such as The Daily Show. Although the campus carry law remains in place in Texas, the “Cocks, Not Glocks” protests continue to inspire other similar actions and new waves of gun safety activism via a feature-length documentary film currently in production about the protests.



Photo credit: TAMIR KALIFA, NYT

*Student Rosie Zander waves a sex toy during a rally on the first day of classes at University of Texas at Austin, a protest of a new law that allows concealed handguns on the state’s college campuses, in Austin, Texas, Aug. 24, 2016.*

Jessica Jin, the founder of the largest gun safety protest in Texas history, wants students to know that her work began largely by accident. “I want students to be excited about the possibilities of what they could achieve with just a little deliberate initiative,” she said. Jin worries that young leaders risk getting stuck in the “preparing to lead” phase even though it’s impossible to ever be fully prepared. She wants students not to hesitate to get started with whatever their mission is, and start today by trusting their conscientiousness and altruism, along with friends and networks, to figure things out and troubleshoot as they go.

Like Jin, protestors have learned that demonstrations are valuable whether or not their particular objective is realized—demonstrations lift up issues into the public eye, allow activists to try out frames on a mass audience, and often have incremental gains that are not immediately recognizable. Demonstrations are necessary but insufficient as are the other tools we use to rebuild society. No single tool can do the job on its own. We need marchers, mayors, teachers, and movement leaders.



Photo credit: RIGEL ROBINSON



*Rigel Robinson, Published in Berkeleyside, Oct. 2018.*

## Electoral Campaign: Rigel Robinson

Like students at many major universities, University of California (UC), Berkeley students have a complex relationship with the city where they attend school. Despite being affected by local, policy-decision making—everything from bike lane ordinances to affordable housing—Berkeley students lacked local political representation to advocate for their interests for most of the university’s history. In 2012, UC Berkeley student government led a local referendum to create a new city council district to represent the university’s interests. Even after the university district’s creation however, the council seat remained occupied

by an older council member who was not a recent UC Berkeley student or alumnus. That changed when Rigel Robinson graduated from UC Berkeley in the summer of 2018 and launched a grassroots campaign for the first student representation on the Berkeley City Council.

Robinson’s innovative campaign refused to accept contributions over \$50 and won endorsements from local officials as well as national groups such as Run For Something. In November 2018, Robinson won his election with 55.7% of the vote, and has since served as a progressive champion on the council for UC Berkeley’s more than 40,000 students.

Representation is an important part of getting ideas enacted as policies. Rather than just persuade decision makers, advocates can become decision makers themselves, thus cutting out the intermediary. For students, the value of having allies inside the governance system is that they can advocate for issues students care about on their behalf.

## Public Service: Westwood Forward

The Westwood Neighborhood Council was formed in 2010 to create what Westwood’s residents at the time deemed necessary to protect their preferred way of life. Some of the policies they instituted included no dancing, no live music, no reduced drink prices or happy hours, and prohibiting development to build affordable housing for underrepresented populations. The problem with these policies was that Westwood’s northern area abutted the UCLA campus where many students lived or needed to live to easily access campus and reduce commute time.

Given the restrictive, racist, and classist nature of the policies dictated by the mostly older white residents who made up the Council, students attempted to insert themselves into the decision-making process to voice their concerns. When they could not gain ground with the Council, Michael Skiles, third-term

**IN AN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN, THERE ARE GENERALLY TWO OR MORE CANDIDATES WHO ENGAGE IN A SET CAMPAIGN CYCLE THAT INCLUDES SPEECHES, MEDIA COVERAGE, SOCIAL MEDIA, CONVENTIONS, AND OTHER PUBLIC PLATFORMS WHERE CANDIDATES COMMUNICATE TO CONSTITUENTS THE IDEAS THEY SUPPORT.** The

campaign ends when those constituents vote for candidate and the candidate is elected. An electoral campaign differs from an issues campaign in that it is intended to elect a specific person based on their stated platform of values and policies; whereas, an issues campaign is an organized effort to educate the voting general public on an issue and to mobilize them to support that position in the appropriate way.

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These local decision-making and advisory bodies play a vital role in bringing transparency, change, and growth to the neighborhoods, cities, and counties they serve. As voluntary, appointed commissioners, residents can advise their local elected officials on a wide range of programmatic and policy issues and, in some cases, are empowered to make and/or enforce policies that impact all community residents.

president of UCLA's Graduate Students Association, and others (professors, local business owners, and residents) formed their own neighborhood council called Westwood Forward.

The student advocates proposed that Westwood's representation be split into a north council and a south council. The south council could maintain the current policies of south Westwood and the north would consist of alternative interests in line with creating a student- and business-friendly, and affordable, environment. The students won and Skiles was elected as the first North Westwood Neighborhood Council President. He said, "It wasn't just students who achieved the win, but also a coalition of business leaders, the local Persian community, UCLA staff and faculty, and homeowners who didn't support the old conservative neighborhood council regime." He continued with, "Ignoring students

Forming off-campus, student-led organizations with local non-students can help facilitate community equity and access.

just because we won't be here long enough to reap the rewards is the same sort of catastrophic mistake that today's politicians are making ignoring climate change because they think that hopefully they'll be dead before our planet will eviscerate in a puff of smoke. You have to pay it forward and think about the long term implications."

Student advocates should consider using this public service tactic when they need to change local, community policy. Forming off-campus, student-led organizations with local non-students can help facilitate community equity and access.



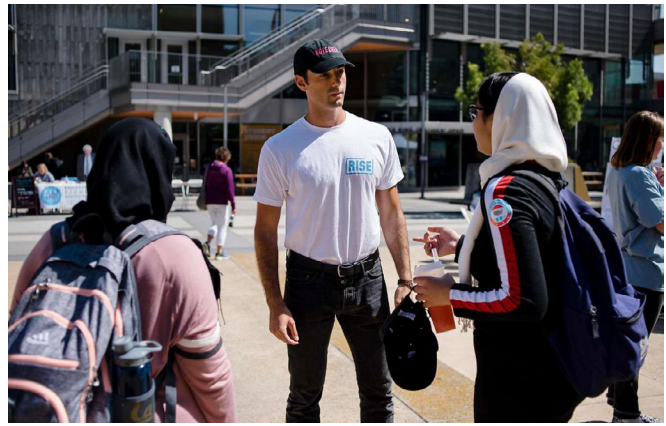
*A meeting between city officials and Westwood Forward.*

Photo Credit: Jacob Preal/Daily Bruin

## Student Advocacy Group: Rise

In the fall of 2017, three students at public universities in California founded Rise, a student advocacy nonprofit focused on free college tuition and ending student hunger and homelessness. (Disclosure: the main author of this report is one of the Rise co-founders.) Whereas other issue areas have major advocacy groups such as the Sierra Club for climate change or the ACLU for civil rights, there is no major advocacy group for college affordability despite tuition doubling in a generation, nearly half of students experiencing hunger, and more than \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt in the nation's economy. With the vision of becoming that kind of advocacy group for college affordability, Rise launched with approximately \$40,000 in grassroots funding and student organizers building support on their campuses.

The first test of Rise's advocacy skills was persuading former Governor Jerry Brown to sign bill AB19, which made one year of community college free in California. Rise students rallied more than 6,500 students and supporters to sign a petition calling for the governor to sign the bill into law in a few weeks. The day after Rise students delivered their petition to the governor, he signed the bill into law. Since then, Rise has expanded the first-year free community college bill to offer two years free for full-time students, organized to stop tuition hikes at public universities, and win hundreds of millions of dollars in new state funding for students.



Max Lubin, founder of Rise California, speaks with students during a VoteCrew event on the UC Berkeley campus.

Photo Credit: Michael Short/San Francisco Chronicle

Students looking to form a nonprofit should consider creating a 501(c)4 if their main goal is to improve a social situation the community faces, such as to increase affordable housing, and believe lobbying would be an effective secondary strategy to creating more affordable housing. The intention is to remove the barriers to housing from two angles — one with the community approach via the priority work of the organization, plus the secondary activity of convincing legislators to institute bills that would mandate affordable housing. Students must also have the bandwidth to both operate this type of nonprofit plus lobby for the issue they are addressing and believe lobbying is the best approach to facilitate the change they seek.

**To learn more about Rise, visit [RiseFree.org](https://RiseFree.org).**

**AS A 501(C)4 NONPROFIT, RISE CAN BE AN ADVOCACY VEHICLE.** Organizations with this classification are permitted unlimited lobbying activities and may engage in some partisan political activity as a secondary activity to their principal social-welfare cause. Lobbying is the act of trying to persuade a legislator to vote for a particular issue. Lobbyists can be advocates for a cause, or represent voters or corporations. Partisan political activity is action taken in the interest or cause of a particular political party, such as Democratic or Republican. A 501(c)4 can engage in this type of partisan political activity as long as its primary activity is to better the common good and social welfare of the community — any political activity must be secondary to the social cause work. Further, 501(c)4 organizations do not pay federal income taxes, though donations to these organizations are not tax-deductible.



## SwipeOut Hunger: 501(c)3

SwipeOut Hunger is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that addresses college student hunger by recycling students' unused meal credits and donating the funds to meal swipes for students who cannot afford them, or making donations to a campus food pantry. Rachel Sumekh and a few of her friends founded Swipe in 2010 while they were students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). They developed their innovative approach in response to witnessing so many of their peers on campus struggle with hunger. What began as a student movement at UCLA grew into a nonprofit organization after Sumekh's graduation that has served more than 1.7 million meals and works with students across 80 colleges and universities nationwide.

Sumekh describes herself as a shy student who saw a specific opportunity for action. Despite the resistance she faced implementing her solution, she persisted and gained confidence by enlisting friends to join her movement. Her advice to other students, especially women or other groups who are underrepresented among social entrepreneurs, is to "Take whatever goal you have and multiply it by 10 or cut your timeline in half because you're likely underselling yourself." For students who are beginning their journeys to start a campaign, movement, or organization, Sumekh advises them to prepare themselves by understanding their specific goal as well as the goals of the people they meet, and run through scenarios so that students are never caught off guard.

The 501(c)3 structure would benefit students looking to make a long-term commitment to the social issue they want to address. 501(c)3 status indicates credibility in the nonprofit community. Such organizations generally offer employees decent salaries plus significant benefits, such as health insurance, retirement, and limited liability, which means that students could have a good quality of life while doing work that is meaningful to them.

**To learn more about Swipe Out Hunger, visit [SwipeHunger.org](http://SwipeHunger.org).**



Photo Credit: <http://volunteerucla.edu>

Members of UCLA's Swipe Out Hunger chapter.

### **A 501(C)3 IS THE MOST COMMON FORM OF NONPROFIT.**

These organizations can engage in a broad array of activities, but are subject to limited amounts of lobbying and prohibited from engaging in any political activity that supports or opposes a candidate for public office. Donations to these nonprofits are tax-deductible, and the organizations themselves do not pay taxes on income that comes in the form of donations from private, government, and nonprofit sources. Although incorporating a 501(c)3 nonprofit is a time-intensive process that can take months or a year or more to receive approval, it is common for start-up nonprofits to seek fiscal sponsors who serve as the fiscal agent managing grants, payments, and operations while they grow. Student advocates who have the time and resources to create a lasting organizations should consider starting a 501(c)3.

# Forming an Organization

As we've seen, one of the most challenging decisions for any social change effort is how it should be structured—should students plan a demonstration, run for office, start an organization, or something else? While students need to make important decisions about how to organize their immediate team of volunteers, they also need to ensure that they are familiar with the formal or legal aspects of their planned endeavor if they want to create an organization.

Often, students who are leading change begin with “I want to start a nonprofit.” However, incorporating a nonprofit, or any organization type, is a time- and labor-intensive effort, and usually requires substantial start-up capital. What's a good strategy for deciding what kind of framework makes the most sense for given the goal? A good rule of thumb is that if students do not have an immediate, pressing need, they probably don't need a legal organization to accomplish their goals. For example, if all they need to get started is a brand, logo, social media accounts, or website, none of these require forming a new organizational entity, and so students can move forward as individuals and expect their expenses to be low or zero.

Lots of movements work best by staying at the demonstration level and so there's no pressure to think the work is only successful if students form some sort of organization or run a funded campaign. Typically, the need to create a formal organization arises when an effort is moving from the start-up phase into a more established phase that requires infrastructure and funding, including from grants, significant donations, and/or campaign contributions.

For comparison, the following table depicts the types of formal organizations students can consider forming and their definitions.

**Table 2. Types of formal organizations and their definitions**

TYPE	DEFINITION	VALUE
<b>Political action committee (PAC) such as Blue Future PAC</b>	A PAC is an organization whose main purpose is to raise and distribute campaign funds to candidates seeking political office.	PACs can influence the outcome of elections, and being connected to elected officials helps advocates move legislation.
<b>501(c)4 nonprofit such as Rise, Inc.</b>	501(c)4s are social welfare nonprofits that exist to improve the common good. They typically do not pay federal income taxes. However, donations are not tax-deductible.	501(c)4 organizations are permitted to lobby for a cause and thus can make big policy moves.
<b>501(c)3 nonprofit such as Swipe Out Hunger</b>	501(c)3 organizations can engage in a broad array of activities, but are subject to limited amounts of lobbying (i.e., advocating for specific legislation) and prohibited from engaging in any political activity that supports or opposes a candidate for public office. They make their money through fundraising with foundation, corporations, and individuals.	501(c)3 organizations are generally seen as credible advocacy entities that can support staff, build movements, and offer programs.

# The Time Is Now

Despite the challenges they face in affording college, juggling contemporary social issues like climate change and gun violence, and dealing with their existing commitments and responsibilities, college students are finding ways to remain at the forefront of social change. In interviews with more than a dozen student activists informing this report, the overwhelming consensus was that students should not wait for the perfect opportunity or moment to make a change.

Experienced and effective student leaders described themselves as novices when they began social advocacy work, and emphasized the importance of navigating challenges as they went rather than seeking to know every solution in the beginning. In that spirit, we hope to inspire students in their journeys toward making their campuses, communities, and the broader world a better place for future generations of students and the communities they come from.

College students are indispensable in leading the social change that makes the world a more equitable place for all.

There is no perfect way to make change. The uniting theme, though, from Fisk University protests 100 years ago to students leading Swipe Out Hunger today, is that college students are indispensable in leading the social change that makes the world a more equitable place for all.