



## Campus Activism: How to Become a NOW Activist in High School



When adults think of campus activism, rarely do they picture a passionate group of 15-year-olds campaigning for abortion rights, or high school juniors designing innovative posters for a rally—the one they themselves have organized. The exciting atmosphere of college campuses often eclipses the activities in which high school students engage and the gains they are achieving. However, with increasing frequency high school students are becoming active and mobilizing for change. Gay rights, reproductive rights, and racial and gender equity are now understood by high school students to be an integral part of their reality as citizens of our country; they now see that important causes can only be advanced through immediate action.

Yes, high school students are young. Most are not even eligible to vote. But despite their supposed lack of experience and the limitations they face because of age, high school students offer political movements considerable resources. Youthful idealism and passion might seem unimportant to some, but these qualities are at the core of all successful campaigns and victories.

The newness of the high school campus movement is what makes it so exciting, such a source of hope for those pursuing equity and justice. Yet this "freshness" can also act as a pitfall unless we navigate it successfully. Because high school leadership and activism are relatively new, in many communities there are no success stories and no history to draw upon to know how to engage in activism effectively.

NOW wants to support young activists in every way possible, and it is our hope that you will be able to use this Action Guide as a resource to help you, whether you are starting a new NOW club, taking over the club's leadership, or just planning a single event. Also know that the State and local NOW chapters are eager to help young activists in whatever project they are pursuing. Chapter officers' contact information can be retrieved on the chapters web page.

NOW has made a commitment to guide and support the newest generation of activists, leaders, and feminists, and one way the organization has tried to do this is by establishing the Young Feminist Task Force (YFTF). Composed of women 30 or younger, most of the Task Force members have engaged in activism in high school or college and have valuable experiences and advice to share. If you think that you could gain from their perspective, feel free to contact the YFTF by email or via social media: [youngfeminists@gmail.com](mailto:youngfeminists@gmail.com), @NOWYoungFems, and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NOWYFA/>.

If you are unhappy about what you see around you—either in the environment of your high school or your country—know that high school clubs are excellent vehicles in which to raise awareness about existing problems, inspire people to act, and make palpable change. NOW is an organization that is devoted to a wide range of issues, and we have resources for our members on subjects as diverse as pay equity, domestic violence, women's participation in athletics, reproductive freedom, and gay and lesbian rights. If you are looking to start a club whose scope is large, history deep, and potential great, NOW can provide you with what you need to inspire, lead, achieve. We look forward to learning about your victories!

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## **STEPS TO FORMING A SUCCESSFUL NOW CLUB AT YOUR SCHOOL**

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### **(1) Commit to the Issues**

All that's really important for a NOW president to have is dedication to gender equality and an interest in effecting change. You need to remember that you don't have to be an expert on women's issues before the club gets started. The NOW club should serve the same role for you as it will for all of its other members: education. So even if you don't go into the job knowing every statistic related to gender issues or being familiar with *Roe v. Wade* or Title IX, you will soon.

To reiterate: the important thing for a NOW club president is interest in the issues, not extensive experience (although both are enriching!). Don't let the fact that you haven't been previously involved in these issues deter you from taking on the job. A little bit of research on the internet, talks with individuals, and creativity is all you need to prepare for the job. Everything else will fall into place as the year goes on.

One great place to start is to become a member of NOW. You can do this online in just a few minutes. You can become a member for as low as \$15, and getting a NOW membership will allow you to be aware of NOW's campaigns, action ideas, and victories. It will also help local chapters be aware of your presence. (Be sure not to skip the "Affiliate with your chapter" code when signing up.) While it's not necessary that all of your club's participants also sign-up for a NOW membership, encourage them to do so. Their membership will provide NOW, the organization that manages issues about which you are concerned, with more supporters and resources.

### **(2) Getting Started: Research what already exists**

So you've decided to start a NOW club... Just remember-NOW is one of the only organizations devoted to women's empowerment that doesn't just focus on one issue, such as gay rights or economic justice. NOW has resources and actions devoted to many important causes. (Check out our issues page to learn about all of the issues NOW is working on which could benefit from your energy and help). Having a NOW chapter gives club leaders a wide scope of issues to work on and lots of freedom to shape the club's direction and form.

But before starting a NOW club, you might want to explore what other avenues for activism are already in place in your high school. There might not be any other women's organization, which makes your role even more important and your presence all the more valuable. However, there might already be a club in existence that intersects with some of NOW's issues. See what there already is in your high school and communicate with others (say, the leaders of your school's Gay-Straight Alliance, or the pro-choice group). Try to discuss with them how your club will be different but also how you can partner with them on some actions or meetings. If there already is a women's group at your high school, maybe sit down with the leaders and talk about how having a NOW club (instead of a more general women's group) might be a good idea. Having a NOW club has its advantages because it brings with its name a whole history of successes, recognition of its causes and goals, and an engaged and able support staff to help you in whatever you might need.

### **(3) Creating a leadership team**

While it might seem easier to run the NOW club yourself-after all, independent leadership can save you arguments and time spent planning who will do what-the reality is that running a NOW club is work, and down the road you'll be glad to have someone to share it with. Ask yourself: is there someone who you know you will work with well if you were to share the presidency of the club? Do you know someone who is passionate about these issues and will be willing to take on work? While it can sometimes work to run a club with your friend, often the better choice is a person who you don't know well but someone with whom you know you can *work* well. Working with someone you are not particularly close to allows you to get things done more efficiently. Also, if you are working with someone who is different from you, you will have access to a greater variety of opinions and ideas. This will definitely enrich the club.

When selecting your co-leader(s), make sure you are asking someone who doesn't have too much going on already. While it might seem like a good idea to ask someone who has proven that she or he can get things accomplished (the captain of several sports teams, the star of the musical, or the person who already leads an activist club might initially seem like a perfect choice of person with whom to work), make sure that you don't bring someone onto the club's leadership team who's already juggling too many things.

Make a list of people you are thinking about asking to come on board and write next to each name what he or she would bring to the position of co-president. Making such a list should help you see the advantages of working with each person and help you decide on what qualities you are looking for in a co-leader. Make sure to pick someone who is different from you (someone from a different circle of friends, who does a different activity, or has a different background), so that he or she will attract a wider variety of people to the club meetings. If there are two other people you think would work well with you, consider asking them both to lead with you. But don't ask more than two! Leading with more than two other people will make communication and organization difficult.

### **(4) Create your NOW club (registration, funding, faculty advising)**

Every school has a different system for setting-up and registering a club, so the best thing to do is check with the administration and teachers and figure out what are the best steps to take in order to establish your club. Often schools will have a form to fill out in order to register your club. Before filling out the form, know what day of the week you want to meet, and how often (every week or every other week is probably best, because it keeps members loyal and keeps your club as a priority in their minds). Also, decide on a meeting time. (Lunch-time meetings usually work because people can bring their lunches to the meeting. Otherwise, you could meet after school, but this can often conflict with other activities.) Also, have a classroom picked out, so that you can request permission to use that space. Having a regular place to meet will make your club seem more official and will make things easier on you throughout the year (because you won't have to scramble to locate a place for your meeting every time you hold it).

Even if your school does not officially require you to have a faculty advisor or sponsor, this can be a good idea because it lends legitimacy to the club and will give you a formal resource if you ever need help or information. If the school knows that a faculty member stands behind the club, it is more likely to take the club seriously. And if students know that a well-respected faculty member endorses the club (and will be at meetings), they might be more eager to associate with the club, too.

Picking a faculty advisor is tricky. While people who teach any subject can be passionate about women's rights and gender equality, consider looking to a History teacher to become your formal advisor. Gender issues are usually very relevant to the lessons they are teaching, so they have probably thought about them a great deal (or at least would be able to offer an interesting perspective on historical events, such as *Roe v. Wade*, the Suffrage Movement, or Title IX). If there's not a teacher who strikes you as someone who's experienced in these issues, ask other teachers for recommendations. You might be surprised about the type of backgrounds and interests that some teachers have. Also know that it's not necessary that the teacher be extremely well-versed in these issues. While it would be most beneficial to have a teacher who's worked on and thought about these issues before, remember that the most important function of a faculty advisor is to provide support, ideas, organization and continuity. If there's someone you think would be invested in and excited about the club, ask her or him, regardless of the teacher's past experience.

When you approach the teacher, be sure to explain clearly what you are expecting, what the time commitment will be, and what the teacher's role will be in advising you and in meetings themselves. The teacher is more likely to commit if she or he knows exactly what's being asked of him or her. The best way to make the request is in a formal meeting, not after class or in the hall, where there could be distractions. Perhaps email your teacher to set up a meeting. Make sure all of your leadership team is there and that you outline your plan and goals fully. Make the club sound exciting, and explain how having a faculty member's help with the club is important to its success.

After you have registered your club with your high school, be sure to log on to the NOW website and register your club with NOW. Doing so will allow NOW to put you in touch with your local NOW city and state leadership and be there to field any questions you might have. Also, once you are added to our list of high school clubs, we'll be able to put you in touch with other high

school clubs, so that you can join forces on actions, share ideas, and give each other support if you need it.

### **(5) Plan your goals for the year/the club's role**

Once you have your club leadership and registration in order, you're set to start planning for the year. Sit down with your co-leader(s) and faculty advisor and try to articulate what you want to accomplish during the year. There's probably going to be a lot of exciting and creative ideas circulating in your mind, but try to look at your most basic goals and document them (ideally focusing on two or three).

While it might be tempting to set your goals high-after all, there is a lot to do around these issues-don't be overly-optimistic or you might end up not meeting any of your goals. Start small, and think of your most basic goal. Is the point of the club to create a haven for those who are already aware of gender issues, so that they can speak safely about them? Are you more interested in bringing new people into the movement? Is your goal to create discussion around gender or organize action? Remember, even though a goal might seem small, added up, high school activists are making a great impact. For example, if your goal is to draw in ten loyal club-supporters and make them dedicated to NOW's causes, then that's a worthy goal. If every high school club does the same, the movement is going to be critically strengthened each year!

#### **Example of a Year's Goal:**

*Our goal for the year is to have discussions about gender issues bi-weekly. We also want to have two actions off campus where we join a larger campaign that's going on in the area. We also want to make sure that our school observes the Day of Silence in honor of those who were killed in hate crimes because of their sexual orientation.*

Be sure to write down everything that you discuss, not just your main goal(s). Even though you might think you'll remember all of your ideas, it will be good to have them written down and consolidated in one place. Also, if at any point during the year you feel like you are losing momentum or you don't have an idea for a meeting, you can look back at this initial brainstorm, and it will most likely spark something.

Once you decide on your main goal(s) for the year, try to devise how you'll accomplish them. List the steps you want to take, and the order in which you want to approach your various projects. Although it might seem unnecessary to be so specific early on, it will help to have a basic guide for yourself of how you'll accomplish certain things. Time goes by so quickly, especially when tests, homework, and practices go into full swing. You'll be pleased to have a basic timeline to remind you when you need to have things finished in order for them to actually take place.

After you've heard from everyone about what he/she hopes for from the club, what you will accomplish for the year, and how/when you'll get it done, be sure to set up a date by which you will have accomplished your first task. If your first task is to hold a club meeting and to have met with the president of your local NOW chapter, say that you will do so in the next month, and

make a date for everyone to reconvene around that time. Having a date for your goal will help you launch your efforts right away and keep you from getting distracted by other things.

## **(6) Designing/orchestrating your first meeting**

Not to load on the pressure, but the first meeting of a club is the most important one. It **sets the tone** for the character the club will have, and it will either hook or deter the prospective members who attend. With that said, don't think too much about it, or you'll drive yourself crazy and you'll be too nervous to even hold the first meeting! Just realize that it's an important meeting and go ahead and start with the planning.

Attendance at the first meeting is very important. **You want to pack the room**, if at all possible. Even if all of the people don't end up becoming members, that's fine. At least they will have come and heard what your club's all about, and they'll probably talk about NOW to their friends, who are also potential members. Also, having a big attendance will be sure to generate a lot of discussion and excitement at your school, which will do some of your work for you. (If your goal is to raise awareness about gender issues, then having people talk among their friends, families, or teachers about the club meeting will save you some work and reach people to whom you wouldn't normally have access.)

Be sure to **pick a day for your meeting well in advance**, and look to see if there are other conflicts that would detract from your attendance. (Are certain days of the week particularly busy days? Are people more likely to go off campus on particular days? Is there a big test that day or the next which would deter a lot of people from coming?)

**Advertise.** Make posters and put them up around campus about four days before your meeting (not too far in advance for people to forget about it, but not with notice so short that people can't come). Make sure that your poster is visually attractive but also informative (so people know what the club meeting is about). (See [Resources](#) section for an example.) A **thought-provoking question** might be good if your first meeting is going to be a discussion. (For example, "Does gender inequality exist at school?"). A speaker is also a good way to launch the year ("Come hear Ms. Teacher talk about her experience in college before and after Title-IX was passed!").

If possible, **make an announcement** at assembly, in your school newspaper, or on your school's radio or loud speaker about who you are, what NOW is, and what your goals are. Such an announcement will put you on people's radar screens and make them more likely to consider your posters and projects when they come into contact with them.

Be sure to **actively recruit people to come** to your meetings! Nothing is wrong with telling people in the hall: "Remember to come to NOW today!" Being active and trying to recruit members will only help your attendance, and you might get people to consider coming to meetings who otherwise would not even have thought of it. Also, be sure to remind your friends about the meetings. You'll be amazed what valuable support your friends and acquaintances can provide in these meetings and how they can really enrich discussions!

Lastly, just because your club is called the National Organization for Women, it doesn't mean that only girls should participate. Make clear in your announcements and "recruiting sessions" that **boys are welcome** and encouraged to come. Boys are often interested in gender and equality issues and will work with girls to achieve them if given the chance. Having boys there will diversify discussion and make talks more productive. If it's all girls, it's possible that meetings could be just preaching to the choir because girls have most likely thought about these issues before. Boys will provide alternative views, and you'll raise awareness about the issues girls face. The meetings will make boys more aware and receptive to future actions that your club will work on.

### **(7) Running the First Meeting**

While it's not necessary to go into the first meeting (or any meeting, for that matter) with an absolute plan of what needs to be discussed, writing out a general outline of points that you want to hit can help the flow of the meeting. For the first meeting, you can start by introducing your leadership team. Have each person introduce her or himself (you can also have the faculty advisor do the same) and say why he or she has decided to lead NOW and what issue interests her or him most.

You can also give a general overview of the organization and its main goals and platforms, perhaps briefly touching on the organization's history. However you decide to introduce yourselves and the club, keep it relatively brief. Starting things with a long talk might lose some people's interest, and you want to keep the first meeting engaging and lively. Consider opening the meeting up for questions and see what issues people bring up. If there's time, you could also ask the people there what issues they would like to see acted on. This gets your prospective members invested in the club immediately.

Beginning the club's year in such a way gives people a broader understanding of the club and helps them decide if they want to be a part of it. However, it might be more effective to have the first meeting not be an informational one but a "hook," having a lively discussion or debate that would engage people and make them want to come back in the future. Posing a question that is accessible to everyone and close to home could generate meaningful and exciting discussion. For example, you could ask "If you believe in gender equality, can you listen to popular hip hop and rap music?" or "Does our high school have gender issues?" or "How many girls, as a percentage of the students in their class, are taking advanced math classes by the end of their high school career?" Not only would these topics probably bring a lot of students to your meetings, but they would show that your club is going to do exciting things in this coming year. This would encourage students to come to future meetings.

Regardless of what you decide on for your first meeting, remember to keep some things in mind. First of all, if you show that you are nervous, it probably means that you're not going to be very talkative, and this means that the meeting will be quiet and people less likely to contribute. Remember to communicate with your co-leader(s) about how you want to run things the first time through. Although it's understandable that things may be a bit shaky the first meeting, it will help if you work well as a unit. Agree to take turns answering questions or calling on people.

Go through how the meeting will run so that you are prepared in how to introduce questions and you have thought together about how the conversation will flow. Also, although it might seem odd since you are not a teacher, the best way to run meetings is probably to have people raise their hands before they speak so that you can call on them. Doing so will avoid having people speak over one another and having conversation be totally unstructured. If no one is contributing to the discussion, you can refer to some facts, if you do some research before hand. Reading a provocative statistic relating to the topic at hand and asking people what they think of it should get things going.

### **(8) Network with other clubs, organizations, and NOW chapters**

At the risk of repetition, remember to use the forces around you that support your goals when planning for actions and meetings. Hold combined meetings with other activist clubs. Plan days of awareness or benefit events with like-minded groups. Get involved with your local NOW chapter so that you can learn about and participate in issues on the wider community level. (Invite your membership to do so as well.) If it's of interest, there are sometimes positions available on the Executive Boards of local NOW chapters. So if you want to share what you're doing on the high school level with others and participate in larger actions, working with your local NOW chapter could be the perfect opportunity for you.

Be sure also to work with your school's Student Council (or School President) so that they are aware of your work. If you form a good relationship with your school's student leadership, you can count on their support and endorsement of your work. At some schools you can also apply to them for funding (for pizza for your first meeting or for money for club members to attend a NOW conference). Also, if you are looking to make policy change (like a revision to your school's policy on sexual harassment or your school's dress code), being familiar with the Student Council will help you present your ideas. In general, being on good terms with teachers and student groups can do nothing but help you, so don't be hesitant to introduce yourself and your club. Don't worry-your work will be well respected, and people are surprisingly open and interested once given the opportunity.

### **(9) Suggested topics for discussion/actions**

The following are some ideas for discussion topics. Each topic will draw a different crowd, but, if you are successful with marketing the club and creating a friendly and accessible environment, it should be interesting to hear the perspectives of new members who will come to the different meetings and are passionate about the subjects. While certainly the leaders of NOW are more likely to represent a certain opinion (for example, that support of women's sports is a positive thing or that reproductive choice should be an option), it is important not to shoot down the ideas of those who don't agree. Instead, listen respectfully (and make sure that other club members do, too) and then try to suggest other ways of looking at the issue. You are in a powerful position to make that person see the problem from a position she/he has never considered; so it is important to be respectful and listen, so that person will do the same to you.



**Reproductive rights.** What are members' views on abortion? What are good strategies for gaining more reproductive freedom/choice? What are good ways to communicate with those who don't share the belief that choice should exist?

**Same-sex marriage.** Are civil unions really the same as marriage? Should marriage be legalized? Why is our country so resistant to the idea? What are good strategies for communicating with people about the importance of marriage? Is this topic relevant to high school students?

**Pay equity.** Is pay inequity still a reality for women? Does the "glass ceiling" still exist? How does this impact women in society? What is the best way to make change in this area? Will progress come through education, more women working, grassroots action, or legislation?

**Sports.** How has Title-IX changed sports for women? Is there equality between men's and women's sports (on the larger scale and in your high school)? Is it fair to deprive men's sports of funding in order to support women's teams?

**High School.** Is there gender inequality in your high school? Are there certain things which boys are able to do that girls are not (or vice versa)? How does gender operate on the sports field, in the classroom, or outside of school?

**The ERA.** What is the history of the Equal Rights Amendment? Why was it defeated? Is a Constitutional amendment necessary in our modern society to ensure women's equality?

**Music.** How does the music that we listen to reflect gender dynamics in our society? Is it unacceptable to listen to Hip Hop as a girl or boy who believes in equality?

**Feminism.** What does the word "feminism" mean? Do members identify as feminists? What are society's views of feminists? Are there certain stereotypes that operate that make people hesitant to align themselves with feminism? Is it important to identify yourself as feminist?

**Eating Disorders.** How common are eating disorders? Why do people have them? Do they receive enough recognition as a serious illness?

**Sweatshops.** What are they? Why are sweatshops a "women's issue?" How are we complicit in their existence? What can we do to help girls who are 13-18 get out of this work and get better pay or an education?

**Domestic violence.** How widespread a problem is it? What resources are available in your town for women who deal with this problem?

**Female Genital Mutilation.** What is it, where does it go on, and why is it performed? Some women who undergo it, though, say they want it and that it is part of their cultural heritage. Does this mean it should be accepted and allowed to go on?

**(10) Keep your meetings interesting**

Because it is important for members to remain actively involved in your club, remember to intersperse discussions with other meeting formats to keep meetings interesting and avoid being monotonous. Here are some suggestions of things to do during meetings:

**Watch a movie.** You can show a film that is controversial to generate discussion. (For example, if you want to generate discussion, you could show a film, "The Silent Scream," that used to be shown in Catholic schools to show why abortion is "murder.")

**Write letters.** You can write letters to anti-choice congress members, companies that are sued for gender discrimination, clothing lines that are known to exploit young, female laborers.

**Go to or organize a rally.** Displeased by something that's going on at your school, in your hometown, or in the country? Make your voice heard! You can link up with other clubs or larger organizations (non-profits in your community, other NOW chapters) that are staging a rally or march or conceive of one on your own. Just be sure to publicize it and perform all the necessary prep-work so that it will be a success.

**Share statistics.** You can spend a meeting either researching important stats about gender inequality or designing posters to share them. (A good example of a fact to put up on a sign would be "Women receive 76¢ for every dollar that a man makes doing the same job" or "\_\_\_\_\_ out of \_\_\_\_\_ members of Congress are women"). Put the flyers up around school. This will make sure that even those who aren't coming to the meetings will be thinking about the important issues NOW is working on. It might draw new members, and it will almost certainly generate discussions.

**Bake.** A fun and interesting way to raise awareness about pay inequity in the workplace is to do a bake sale. For every product, you can charge girls three-fourths of the price you charge boys. Be sure to explain that this is because women only earn three-fourths of what men make. It might be controversial, but it is almost guaranteed to start some thinking and productive discussions.

**Do an action:** On days of significance, such as International Women's Day or the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, be sure to do an action, hold a benefit dinner, or have a meeting. Use the day to bring attention to your club and to the cause.

**Attend conferences.** Bring members to conferences. You can find out about these through various organizations, and there are a lot of conferences that relate to NOW's issues. Attending a conference can help you and your club members learn more about certain issues, make contacts with people who could help your club in the future, and help strengthen your club members' bonds and commitment to the club. Sometimes schools are even willing to let you miss school in order to attend the conference, and some are even willing to help subsidize the cost of attending it.

**Bring in a speaker.** Often discussions about abstract ideas aren't as powerful as hearing directly from someone about a subject. Having an interesting person speak at your meeting is likely to

draw new people to it, and, of course, you can always have a discussion after the speaker presents or at the next meeting. Some ideas for speakers are:

- A NOW leader (chapter presidents are often eager to reach out to young activists). This might be a good way to start off a year of meetings, because it would frame the club with the larger organization and movement, and the NOW leader would be able to talk about her experience and issues that are of interest to the membership.
- A local activist or politician to talk about women's status on the local or national level or women's status globally.
- A union organizer to talk about sweatshops or the working conditions which women are facing in real life.
- Domestic partners/gay couples or just plain old activists to talk about marriage, activists (for gay rights, reproductive choice, or pay equity).
- An abortion provider (maybe someone from Planned Parenthood, or, if possible, do some research and see if you could find someone who worked in an abortion clinic before Roe v. Wade (a planned parenthood or local university might be able to put you in touch with someone)).
- A teacher. Often teachers are passionate about/experienced with a certain issue and might like to make a presentation or lead a discussion. This can often draw members, especially if the teacher is popular.
- An academic at a local university. This person might have a wider or more enriched perspective than the normal person and might be able to comment on issues in an interesting way.

#### **Resources:**

- The [NOW website](#) has a lot of material for you to work with.
- [Planned Parenthood](#): statistics on birth control and abortion.
- The [Feminist Majority](#): various topics, such as women in sports or Afghan women
- The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) has updates on legal cases that have recently settled and legal information. All of these things are good fodder for meetings.
- [Amnesty International](#) has a campaign to stop violence against women. Their website has information on women's treatment and the state of women internationally.
- The [Human Rights Campaign](#): updates on Gay and Lesbian rights.

MORE SUGGESTIONS? Share them with us!

*This guide to High School NOW Activism was drafted by Alexandra Suich, a member of NOW's national Young Feminist Task Force who was co-president of her high school NOW chapter in San Francisco. She is now a student at Yale.*