



COALITION BUILDING: A HOW-TO GUIDE

WHAT IS A COALITION?

One of the most powerful tools in the state policy advocate's toolbox is working in coalition. Building and participating in coalitions is a critical component of advocacy, and it is especially important for organizations that don't have a lot of capacity to do this type of work on their own. By teaming up with other organizations that share the same goals, smaller organizations can pool resources, reach more policymakers, and more efficiently and effectively make change.

WHY BUILD A COALITION?

- **Strength in numbers:** A coalition brings together diverse groups that share a common goal. By working together, coalition members can increase and expand their influence, and make a stronger case for policy change among different audiences.
- **Expanded resources, expertise, and capacity:** Coalition members bring different skills, knowledge, and expertise to the effort. By sharing resources and collaborating, the coalition can develop a more comprehensive and effective strategy for achieving its goal. Some coalition members, for example, might be great at policy analysis while others excel at communicating or organizing. By pairing these complementary skill sets, coalitions maximize their effect and minimize the work that any one coalition member must do.
- **Diverse viewpoints/empower marginalized groups:** Different policymakers listen to different organizations and individuals. Business leaders, for instance, may be more credible to conservative lawmakers while higher education institutions may have strong relationships with their own elected representatives. By partnering, these organizations can expand their sphere of influence, better tailor their messages, and reach more policymakers. Groups representing marginalized populations can have their perspectives elevated through a broader effort.

- **Increased visibility and collective action:** A coalition can generate more visibility and media coverage than a single organization. This approach can help to raise awareness, build broader support for policy change and encourage diverse organizations to coalesce around a shared agenda.
- **Heightened political clout:** When a coalition represents a broad and diverse range of stakeholders, decision-makers are more likely to take their concerns seriously. By building political influence, the coalition can increase its chances of success in achieving the policy change.

Overall, a coalition can create a more powerful voice for change and increase the chances of success in achieving state policy improvements. But effective coalition-building requires strategic planning, strong organizational ability, effective communication, and the skills to mobilize people to act.

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

1. Establish a shared vision, common goals, and/or policy agenda

- Can be created by the lead organization, with other members opting in or can be created collaboratively.
- Key questions to ask: What issue are you trying to address and why is it important? What does success look like? What are the shared goals we are working toward?

2. Be inclusive and strategic in your outreach

- Ensure that the coalition includes meaningful representation of impacted communities.
- Seek coalition partners with different perspectives and orientations, including those who might appear to make strange bedfellows, to reach a wider audience.
- Invite organizations that have strong relationships with the policymakers you are trying to influence and who have experience doing policy advocacy.
- Take the time to meet with prospective coalition partners one on one. Start with people with whom you have a good relationship, who are already working on the issue and/or who you think will be likely to want to join. Build momentum as you go. Strong relationships are the foundation of every coalition.

3. Determine how the group will work together

- Establish roles and responsibilities for participating organizations (see example structure on page 7).
- Set up the coalition's internal processes for:
 - How the group will decide on meeting agendas and make decisions, such as:
 - Consensus vs. majority
 - Steering committee makes recommendations and members vote
 - Different members "own" different workstreams
 - How often they will meet and
 - What is the process and criteria for accepting or inviting new members to join.
- Decide if and how the group will formalize its commitments—for example a set of shared principles or a mission statement that all groups sign onto—and whether or not the commitment will be publicized.
- Consider whether the coalition will have a public presence, such as a website or landing page on one of the members' websites, and a logo.
- Understand respect the diverse beliefs, opinions and experiences of coalition members.

HOW ADVOCACY COALITIONS GET IT DONE

There are as many forms of advocacy as there are coalitions, but here are some ways that coalitions work together:

- **Plan and strategize together** in how to accomplish shared goals and share intelligence and updates about shifts in the policy landscape.
- **Mobilize supporters** – Take advantage of a coalition's broader network to plan grassroots actions at important moments.
- **Amplify partners' communications** – Share relevant partner messages and communications on social media and other platforms across the coalition.
- **Create a joint communications strategy**, especially to take advantage of formats that one organization might not be able to do alone, e.g. storytelling projects, advertising campaign.

- **Co-create policy and advocacy materials** to show strength in numbers, for example sign-on letters to state legislators or Governors, policy briefs, or case studies related to the coalition's focus issue.
- **Organize events together to reach a broader audience** like meetings with key policymakers, advocacy days, rallies, conferences, or panels focused on the campaign's issue focus, or trainings for grassroots advocates.

A great way to launch and give structure to a new coalition is to send a coalition letter requesting more funding for higher education in the state budget. Be specific in your funding requests (which programs do you want to increase and by how much?). Include the logos of your organizations at the top to make it colorful and attention-grabbing. Post it online and share it with the press. Here are a few examples: [Michigan 2022 Budget Request](#), [California 2024-2025 Budget Recommendations](#), [Georgia 2024 Budget Request](#) and [Massachusetts 2025 Budget Request](#).

COALITION WEBSITES

NCAN and its members participate in many coalitions, both formal and informal. Here we offer examples of some of the more formal and established ones, to illustrate a range of resources and messages used. Note that having a website is in no way a requirement for running a successful coalition!

Federal

- [Committee for Education Funding](#) – a large, formal coalition (with dues and paid staff) aimed at increasing federal funding for education.
- [#DoublePell Campaign](#) – a coalition of hundreds of organizations across the country working to double the Pell Grant.
- [Higher Education Immigration Portal](#) – a diverse set of higher education groups that helps provide research and resources to support undocumented students.
- [Let Students Eat Campaign](#) – a national and grassroots effort aimed at loosening the federal SNAP restrictions for college students.
- [Student Aid Alliance](#) – a coalition of over 40 national higher education organizations working to increase funding and support for federal student aid.
- [Today's Students Coalition](#) – a cross-cutting group of associations, policy, and advocacy organizations focused on building policy solutions for adult student learners.

State

- [Californians for College Affordability](#) – A coalition of nearly 50 state-based policy and advocacy organizations working to strengthen need-based financial aid in California.
- [Georgians for College Affordability](#) – A group of college access and success and research organizations united to make college in Georgia widely affordable.
- [Higher Ed for All](#) – A coalition of student groups, labor unions, policy and research organizations advocating for fully funded community colleges and universities.
- [Massachusetts Hunger Free Campus Coalition](#) – This coalition of students, advocates, campus leaders, and community organizations are working to advance legislation and generate more funding to address food insecurity among college students.
- [Maryland Alliance for College Affordability](#) – A group of non-profit organizations that provides a voice for students from low-income and first-generation families and works to improve their access to higher education in Maryland.
- [Michigan Higher Education Attainment Roundtable](#) – A group of stakeholders and state officials that develops and promotes a state policy agenda to increase postsecondary attainment.

YOU'VE GOT THIS!

As your coalition progresses, you'll want to monitor its progress and adjust the strategy as needed. Don't be afraid to change course or add new products, messages, or tactics as you learn more about how the proposal is being received by key stakeholders. This may involve re-evaluating the goals and objectives, changing tactics, or recruiting new members. The most effective coalitions are agile and responsive to feedback.

A popular, old piece of proverbial wisdom reads "If you want to go fast go alone, if you want to go far, go together." Working in coalition can take you far – and make the journey more satisfying and fun. We hope you'll give it a shot, let us know how it goes, and reach out with any questions to Catherine Brown (brownc@ncan.org) or Louisa Woodhouse (woodhouse@ncan.org). You got this!

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- [Coalitions as a Tool for Advocacy: Evidence and Lessons Learned](#)
- [10 Things you Need to Build Clever Coalitions](#)
- [Partners in Prevention Coalition-Building Toolkit](#)
- [Storytelling for Policy Advocacy](#)

STATE COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY COALITION STRUCTURE CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to consider what it means for an organization to be “a member” and how decisions will be made regarding membership, policy priorities, coalition activities, and more. The following are some examples of membership requirements and decision-making processes.

Who can be a member of this coalition?

- Supports the coalition’s mission, long-term policy goal, and policy priorities
- Can have a local footprint, but must understand that this effort is focused on state-level policy
- Agrees to disclose any potential conflicts of interest (e.g., personally/organization benefits from policies or programs supports)
- May request to not use name/logo publicly
- Can be individuals (not organizations) or vice versa
- Members may be required to pay dues. Some coalitions use a sliding scale based on organizational revenue to determine the level of dues owed. Others use categories, such as individual, non-profit, for-profit, association

What is the process of becoming and remaining a member?

1. Organization brought to the Steering Committee for consideration (see next page)
2. Steering Committee considers any conflicts of interest, organizational points of view or priorities and alignment with the coalition
3. Steering Committee votes to invite (consensus of those at meeting required)
4. Members are invited renew their membership annually (or not)

What are the benefits of becoming a coalition member?

- Learn about policy issues impacting college affordability in your state
- Lend your voice and reputation to issues of concern to you/your organization
- Receive alerts about legislation being considered and opportunities to write letters, testify, or add your organization's name to a letter or media piece

STEERING COMMITTEE

What is the role of the Steering Committee?

The Steering Committee manages the general course of the coalition including setting priorities, determining activities in which the coalition will engage, and developing and distributing internal and external communications. Steering Committee members promote the coalition and identify potential members. Generally, one or more members of the Steering Committee will:

- maintain an email listserv of members
- schedule meetings and send calendar invites
- draft and request input on meeting agendas and circulate them in advance
- track tasks and owners and send follow-up emails with to-dos
- share key legislative and other updates
- maintain a notes document with a record of each meeting.

What are the requirements to be a member of the Steering Committee?

- Join at least 75% of Steering Committee bimonthly (during legislative session) and monthly calls
- Provide support to coalition through at least one of the following activities:
 - managing meetings
 - writing letters/emails/communications
 - meeting with policymakers
 - presenting or sharing about coalition at events and community meetings
 - tracking legislation/policy
 - identifying and securing members
 - engaging with like-minded advocates
 - building relationships with college affordability partners across the state.

SAMPLE COALITION MEETING AGENDA

- I. Introductions, warm-up question
- II. Welcome new member/s
- III. Recap of recent events
 - a. Funding proposals for key programs in budget proposal and appropriations bill
 - b. New report by coalition partner
- IV. Upcoming events and opportunities
 - a. Coalition meeting with Senate Higher Education Chairperson
 - b. Testimony at budget committee hearing
- V. Discussion of proposed bill text
- VI. Next steps
 - a. Student op-ed
 - b. Coalition advocacy day at statehouse
 - c. Next meeting will be in person

PLANNING WORKSHEET

GOALS (What are you trying to achieve?)	COALITION ASSETS AND NEEDS (Assess your coalition's assets and needs, including relationships to policymakers, ties to the community, social media presence, knowledge and experience, etc.)	CONSTITUENTS, ALLIES, OPPONENTS (Who's with you? Who do you need to influence?)	TARGETS (Which policymakers are you trying to reach?" Who might be able to help you reach them?)	TACTICS, ACTION STEPS (How will you reach your goals?)
Long Term	Have	Constituents	Primary Target	
Intermediate	Want/Build	Allies	Secondary Target	
Short-Term	Internal Problems	Opponents		