

Campus Organizing: A Guide to PHENOMenal Activism and Advocacy

(a work in progress)

Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts
www.phenomonline.org
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So, you want to get more involved in PHENOM, the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts? Organizing on your campus in support of public higher education is a great way to help the cause, get more people involved in advocating for a full-funded, accessible higher education system for Massachusetts, and help build a grassroots movement for major change. Campus councils play a central role in moving PHENOM forward.

Here's the quick summary. Read further for more detailed suggestions on how to get started. For more information, please contact PHENOM Organizer Ferd Wulkan at 413-577-4121 or wulkan@external.umass.edu

What is a Campus Council?

A Campus PHENOM Campus Council is a group of students, staff, and faculty who come together in support of PHENOM's principles and the understanding that:

- One of the best ways to improve conditions for those who study and work on the campus is to strengthen our whole system of public higher education, and that
- We are stronger when students, staff, and faculty work together on issues of common concern

Ideally, leaders of major student, staff and faculty organizations will be deeply involved with the Campus Council, but this may not always be the case, and you can start a successful campus group even without them. Some Councils will focus their work only on PHENOM's statewide agenda; others will also focus on related campus issues.

How does a Council function

The only requirements for a Council are that it:

- 1) includes at least some students, some staff, and some faculty; and that all 3 constituencies should be represented in the group's public face.
- 2) has general agreement with PHENOM's principles
- 3) meets at least once each semester
- 4) is expected to participate in major PHENOM campaigns, but has complete autonomy to take on whatever issues it chooses, so long as they are consistent with PHENOM's principles.

The Campus Council elects 1 or 2 representatives to the PHENOM Delegate Assembly (if 2, at least one must be a student)

How do we start a Council on our campus?

Reach out to leaders of major organizations (student government, unions, etc.). Reach out to your friends. Talk to the people on your campus who "make things happen". Make it a priority to include representation from staff, students, and faculty.

Schedule a first meeting before September 20. At that meeting,

- Fill people in about PHENOM and its major concerns
- Get agreement that the campus should have a PHENOM council
- Elect representatives to the PHENOM Delegate Assembly
- Start planning a PHENOM event on your campus during the fall
- Schedule another meeting

What do campus groups do?

Every campus group is different, but most do at least 2 things:

- a) Encourage people to participate in statewide campaigns – for example by setting up a call-in day or arranging transportation to a lobby day.
- b) Organizing events on campus – public hearings, lectures, rallies, discussions, even a game show have been organized by PHENOM campus groups.

To be successful, members of campus groups do outreach in many different ways, from Facebook to tabling, from phoning to dorm-storming.

There is no one issue that a campus council must focus on. PHENOM leaders can suggest ideas, but it's best if your group – however small -- decides what you want to work on. PHENOM is usually working on one or more campaigns, and is always looking for help on these issues. Access, affordability, and funding issues affect each campus different – how does it affect your campus or community? What challenges are unique to your campus?

PHENOM organizers have found that events – of any type – are one of the best ways to draw new people in, and get them excited about PHENOM and higher education issues. Finding and developing things for your group to do will help you as an organizer succeed. Worry less about becoming a formal group and focus more on finding exciting issues you want to focus on and events you and others would like to host! Later in this guide, we will look at examples of successful PHENOM events that you might consider hosting on your campus.

Who can help?

As you begin to organize on your campus, you should remain in contact with other members of PHENOM working at the state-wide level. In any given year, there are PHENOM staff, interns, a statewide Board, and volunteers across the state working on issues and events related to public higher education. We can share with you what others are doing; and what you're doing may inspire folks at other campuses/

If you are not already on our mailing list, please join as soon as possible! You can join by visiting our website (www.phenonline.org) or sending us an email with your name, email, and local mailing address. Having a correct address is important, because often we send action alerts to advocates from a particular district (more on that later!).

The PHENOM website is regularly updated with new details on upcoming events and important pieces of legislation, and we strongly recommend you visit the site often to read about the latest PHENOM news. The website also has contact information for people involved in the organization, including the staff and the PHENOM interns. Regular, but not too frequent, emails about PHENOM will find their way to you. PHENOM is continuously planning new events, and typically has several large events during the school year, including a higher education summit, and at least one lobbying day.

How to organize on the campus

As you begin to plan your activities, one important step for you to take is reaching out to members of your campus or community you think might be interested in public higher education issues.

On your campus, this could and should involve students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni. Groups in your college you might consider reaching out to include:

- Faculty members, and the faculty union on campus
- Staff members, and the staff union on campus
- The Student Government Association, and the Student Trustee
- Other students groups, including any registered student organization
- Other members of the college's Trustee board
- Students in your classes
- The local student newspaper and radio station
- Any alumni groups that exist on your campus
- Any sororities or fraternities on campus
- Community Service office at your campus

Begin first with people you know personally. Talk to them informally about PHENOM and higher education issues, and ask if they might want to get involved in PHENOM, or would be willing to attend PHENOM events in the future. For example, if you are a student, you could ask your professors, the staff in Student Affairs, or leaders of the student government. These first contacts can pass along your contact information and interest to everyone else in their organization. Ask each person you speak to, even if they are not interested in getting more involved, for suggestions on who else you might want to speak to about this. From here, begin to build a list of people most interested in participation.

A great way to get more people involved is to ask them what issues they think are important at your college or university. Cuts in state funding to higher education hurts many aspects of our college communities, and will affect each constituency. Try to get a sense of how staff, faculty and students cope, and what issues they see in campus life.

But...what do I say to them? What do I have to say?

Others in PHENOM can help you develop your rap – but the key is to speak from the heart and from your own experience. Why are you involved? What obstacles to affordability and access have you encountered? What do you like about PHENOM? At any given point, PHENOM will have talking points to help you discuss particular issues.

There are several ways to communicate with the groups in your community, even if you do not know anyone in them personally. One of the best is to ask for an invitation to speak with the group at one of its regular meetings. You may want to develop a short presentation to discuss your interest in higher education issues, and your ideas – and others in PHENOM can help you with this. If you have difficulty getting contact information for the faculty or staff union, or the student government association, please contact PHENOM organizers for help. We maintain list of campus contact for nearly every of the twenty-nine college campuses, and are always happy to help.

What about administrators?

College presidents and other administrators can be valuable allies. By lending support to your efforts, they can make it easier to use campus resources (rooms, the PR apparatus, email lists, etc.). If they join with you in calling a meeting, some people are more likely to attend. On the other hand, some college presidents may overtly or quietly oppose your efforts because they want to be in control of all advocacy efforts or because they may not agree with all our positions.

Student Activities staff similarly have proven both helpful and obstructive. Some of them feel very possessive about “their” students and do not really believe in empowering students to make decisions and run organizations. Others are just the opposite and can help you make connections with key student leaders and can help access resources.

So, it is definitely worth reaching out to your college president and student activities director – but keep your eyes open and make sure they don’t try to dominate or undermine your efforts.

Always Collect Contact Information!

As you begin to expand your network, make sure to get contact information from each person you get interested in PHENOM. Lists of contacts are always valuable when organizing events, and asking for help with events. Someone in your group should be assigned to keep a good ongoing list.

PHENOM uses a database system to send out ‘Action Alerts’ to inform people of developing higher education issues. For example, we might send out an action alert informing people about a fight to increase need-based financial aid, or to ask people to call in to a particular legislators office to ask them not to cut aid to a particular program. We also use the action alerts to inform our members of upcoming events, such as a higher education hearing or our higher education summit.

A contact list for your campus group should at minimum include a name, cell phone number, and personal email address. To add people to our action alert database, we need a home (not school or work) mailing address to connect the contact to the state representative and senator. A copy of your list can be sent in an excel file to massphenom@gmail.com. We do not send mail, and never ever give this information out to anyone!

How NOT to start

Based on our experience, we believe that developing a very formal or intricate structure for the group usually does *not* help you get things off the ground. By keeping a group more informal, it can respond to issues as they develop. While some people like creating bylaws or a complex voting structures, focusing on real activities – organizing events, contacting legislators, bringing people to a rally – is more enticing and energizing to the majority of people. Everyone involved in your group will have a range of other commitments to contend with – a job, a family, schoolwork, classes, and other campus responsibilities. Spending too much time on internal matters takes time and energy that not everyone has to spare.

BUT it’s not a bad idea to have a few key roles filled so there is some accountability:

- a) someone to keep a list of contacts
- b) someone to send out meeting notices and reminders
- c) someone to take notes and write up the decisions at each meeting

Events

Hosting events of any kind is one of the best ways to draw people into the organization, and get people excited about organizing, higher education, and PHENOM. Even if you have only a very few people involved in your group, you can still put on a very successful event.

What kind of event should your campus group organize? That is entirely up to you and your group. Some examples of past PHENOM campus events include:

- A talk about free higher education
- A hearing on affordability issues (PHENOM has a guide on how to organize a hearing)
- An evening of letter writing in support of the MASSGrant program
- A workshop on organizing for public higher education
- A meeting with local legislators where you hear from them but also tell them what you think they should be doing
- A discussion about Free Community College
- A table set up in the cafeteria, asking people to get involved and inviting them to attend events
- A visit from the PHENOMobile
- A speakout on affording college
- A talk before the campus Student Government Association
- A game show, with prizes, about public higher education
- A college affordability themed battle of the band

Working together, your group should think about what type of event people on your campus would enjoy and want to attend. Get outside your group, and talk to people in your community about events they would like to see.

The key to successful events:

- a) Provide food! Often campus unions, student governments, or campus administrations will pay for pizza or cookies.
- b) Talk to lots of people about it – try to get teachers to allow members of your group to make an announcement in classes
- c) Know exactly who is doing what before the event, at the event, and after (clean up)
- d) Get everyone who comes to sign in.

If you recruit just one excited person, your event has been a success!

How to plan events

Begin planning your event by outlining what type of event you would like to put on. Your group might want to consider:

- The details: Where can we have this event? How much room do we need, and how many people can we reasonably expect to attend? It's better to have an overcrowded smaller room than an empty-looking larger room. Decide a time and a date as soon as possible
- Can we provide food? Who can help pay for it?
- Decide who should be invited. Extend invitations to every group on campus you can think of, and ask them to spread the word.
- Look at a variety of different communication methods: email, phone, posters, in-person visits.
- Create a list of materials you will need for the event, such as food, microphones, paper, handouts. Ask your college to supply these for free whenever possible.
- Would it help to have the PHENOMobile there? If so, schedule it well ahead of time.
- Write up a short description of the event, including the time and place and why this is timely or interesting, and email it out to everyone on your contact lists and listserves you have access to. Ask people to forward it on to anyone they think might be interested.
- Create a simple flyer, and put copies up around your campus and in your town. Make sure everyone knows it is 'open to the public'
- Consider contacting the President's Office at your campus, and ask them to co-sponsor the event. You might even ask if they are willing to send an email out to the whole campus!
- Write a press release, and send it to your local media several days before the event. (Ask for help from PHENOM if you need it.) Then call them the day before. Designate one or two people to speak with the press, and make sure that any press that show up talk to these people
- Encourage your school newspaper to cover the event both before and after the event. Ask that they include your contact information in the article, so people interested in the event can get in touch afterwards.
- Contact PHENOM. We can put details of the event on the website, and encourage other advocates in the area to attend

Finally, make sure to develop goals for your event in advance. Ask yourself: what would feel like a 'win'? Try to stay optimistic, and don't undersell yourself and your abilities. One way to develop concrete goals for an event is to look at things that can be quantified: number of people who attend, number of new contacts, number of new members joining your group.

Contact with Elected Officials

A major focus of PHENOM's activities is educating elected officials on higher education issues. One activity your campus group can do is establishing good ties with the elected state officials in your area. In the spring, hundreds of PHENOM members visit the state legislature, to discuss funding priorities for higher education in the budget.

We want them to know us when we get there! As issues arise, PHENOM members should be in contact with their Representatives and Senators throughout the year to discuss and advocate for higher education issues and important legislation.

Get to know just who represents your campus community in the state legislature. Create a list of state representatives and senators who represent the area near your campus, as well as any other legislators who represent a significant number of people in your campus community. You can find more information about local reps. and senators from the legislature's website, available at <http://www.mass.gov/legis/legis.htm>.

One successful approach is to schedule a breakfast or lunch with the legislators on a Friday (when they are usually in their district). Invite them to the campus so they get to appreciate it and more people can come. Contact with legislators early in the school year can help during later months, when contact will need to be more frequent.