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# GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

15-20 days

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## SPREADING THE WORD AND THE PASSION THROUGH LOCAL WORK

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### OVERVIEW

While much of what is involved in grassroots organizing has already been covered in this class, a brief history of grassroots organizing combined with use of effective techniques in management and growth can empower students to grow their ideas beyond the scope of the class. The skills are crucial, especially as the students exit the structured classroom setting for the “real” world.

It may, in fact, be tempting to use this unit early in the semester to allow students to use the skills throughout their work, gathering support from those around them. We would encourage this unit to fall, however, at the very least after the essay-writing unit, and probably after the public speaking unit so that the students have the framework to spread their ideas. For, if students are spreading a faulty or incomplete idea, the process of grassroots organizing may backfire. This unit is, however, the best time to start the students thinking about what happens at the end of the semester – will they be done with their issue, or want to continue? And if they continue, in what manner do they wish to do so? How can the skills they are learning here help them to take their project beyond the classroom? And how can they use the rest of the semester to set up those possibilities?

In addition, the time management, organization, and marketing skills needed for grassroots organizing will prove crucial to students in their future activities, from continued education to the work world.

**COLORADO CIVICS STANDARDS ADDRESSED:** 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 2.3, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4

### SAMPLE JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- Where can your work continue to grow? How?
- What would be the best way for your group to attract more people to your cause? Explain why you think this strategy would work?
- How does the work of Cesar Chavez differ from that of Dr, Martin Luther King, Jr.? From SNCC? What pieces of each leadership style could advance your work?
- Is it ever right to break the law? If so, under what circumstances do you think breaking the law is the right thing to do?
- What are your strengths in terms of the skills needed for grassroots organizing? What are your challenges?

## VOCABULARY

**Agenda:** Schedule of items to be considered in a meeting.

**Bylaws:** Set of rules governing the operation of an organization.

**Civil disobedience:** Refusal to obey laws regarded as unjust, usually by employing methods of passive resistance and willingness to accept legal consequences.

**Grassroots:** Arising from the members of a community rather than the leaders.

**Interest group:** Organized body of individuals who share same goals and try to influence public policy to meet those goals.

**Litigation:** Legal proceedings.

**Lobbying:** Trying to influence policymakers to adopt a particular position.

**Mediation:** Act of resolving or settling differences by using an intermediary agent who works with the conflicting parties.

**Negotiation:** Process of arranging an agreement or settling a dispute through conferring or discussing.

## RESOURCES

- Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle, <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/cesarchavez.html>
- Halberstam, David. *The Children*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- King, Martin Luther Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*. Clayborne Carson, ed. New York: Intellectual Properties Management, Inc. in association with Warner Books, 1998.



schedule and location and design their first meeting, complete with agenda.

**Step 4 – Recruiting to a Cause**

**Goals** – Students understand the power in numbers, and the basic concepts of grassroots recruitment.

**Means** – Teacher leads discussion of acting alone and acting in groups, drawing from movements and leaders discussed earlier in the semester. Local activists share the strategies they have used to recruit members. As a class, students brainstorm recruitment possibilities, based on those movements and their own ideas.

**Assignment** – As an assignment, all students must have five “canvassing” conversations, collecting feedback from people on their issue.

**Step 5 – Organizing and Retaining Interest**

**Goals** – Students learn some of the skills essential to organizing and retaining the interest of groups of people.

**Means** – Teacher leads a discussion of importance of obtaining and retaining contact information, emphasizing the importance of respecting the privacy of those who volunteer their contact information. Teacher gives a brief introduction to database software (Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Access, or other program available at the school). The students build a simple database to keep track of human resources, important contacts, and fundraising possibilities for the group. They enter their own information and any information that was volunteered in the canvassing conversations

**Step 6 – Communication Technology in Grassroots Campaigns**

**Goals** – Students learn how to create an effective email update for their campaign.

**Means** – Teacher discusses emails received during the election process, showing sample letters and asking how students and their families responded. Class discusses how to apply the fundamental tenets of grassroots organizing to the internet.

Groups compose a personalized email update concerning the class event. Students send email bulletin to contacts in their databases.

**Step 7 – Setup: Organizing Information in a Toolkit**

**Goals** – Students learn how to package their information and resources so that their campaign can spread “organically.”

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**Means** – Teacher discusses a sample toolkit that might be developed by organizations taking a position on a current “hot” topic such as immigration reform. Lead students in brainstorming what supporters would need to enable them to conduct outreach for their campaign: background, sample talking points (your side’s arguments presupposing the views of the opposition that lead back to your message), instructions for building coalitions, lobbying tips, and other resources. Each student group designs a toolkit for their campaign.

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**Step 8 – Civil Disobedience**

**Goals** – Students understand when civil disobedience may be an appropriate method, the ideologies behind the method, and the possible repercussions.

**Means** – Teacher defines civil disobedience, explaining that it is a method of last resort. Describe how unauthorized protest marches, sit-ins, and other methods can be used to draw attention to injustice that has been impervious to other methods of community action. The work of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can be used as examples. Groups discuss a hypothetical use for civil disobedience in their campaigns.