

Developing a NEW Leadership™ Political Action Project

The political action project, a role-playing exercise, was added to the NEW Leadership™ curriculum in 2003. Students are divided into groups and assigned to research a political issue and prepare a presentation in support of the group's specified policy position on the issue.

The political action project was initiated at NEW Leadership Inland Northwest, hosted by the Women's Resource Center at Washington State University. The action project, designed to be student-driven, provides an opportunity for the students to practice the leadership skills that they learn throughout the program, such as public speaking, working with a group, developing a strategy and message, and enhancing communication skills.

CAWP felt it was valuable to include a political action project into the NEW Leadership™ curriculum in part because students had indicated, in their program evaluations, a desire to learn about current political issues. During the action project, students focus on one current public policy issue, developing a sense of policy arenas and ways to influence public policy.

Goals of the Political Action Project

- learn about a current public policy issue
- learn about different ways to affect policy
- practice public speaking skills
- enhance communication skills
- practice working in a group
- learn how to develop a strategy and message

Selecting an Issue

In order to identify an issue that is currently being addressed in the public policy arena, we look at pending legislation, bills that have been introduced to Congress or state legislatures, and issues that have received significant coverage in the mainstream media.

Since the students have a very short time to complete this project, we look for an issue that may be somewhat familiar to students and will be relatively easy to research. It is also important to select a relatively clear-cut issue that can be understood without extensive research or professional expertise.

Finally, we aim to select an issue that will interest students. Many major political issues that resonate with the voting public (such as Social Security or Medicare reform) are unlikely to capture the interest of a student population. Keep your audience in mind: Who are your students? What is their average age and experience?

Previous NEW Leadership™ New Jersey action projects addressed sex education in public schools and gay marriage/domestic partnerships. (New Jersey had just passed a domestic partnership law that went into effect days before NEW Leadership™.) Both of these issues are somewhat controversial because they involve sex and sexuality, and each provides an excellent example of how private behavior becomes part of the public/political debate.

These issues generated a lot of interest among the students, many of whom had very strong personal opinions on them. Some students had trouble distancing themselves from their personal feelings while working on the assignment. We make a point of posing difficult and controversial issues and assigning some students to argue positions diametrically opposed to their real views. They will surely encounter such issues in the public arena, and it can be valuable for them to try to understand the perspectives and strategies of the opposition.

Implementing the Action Project

Four concerns are of paramount importance when implementing the action project assignment: scheduling, group dynamics, resources and outcome.

Scheduling

Since the action project takes place in the narrow time frame of the NEW Leadership summer institute, we integrate the action project assignment into the overall program. Skills-building workshops are scheduled to maximize their usefulness for the action project and make the most out of the limited time. Two workshops which are important components of the NEW Leadership™ curriculum have been integrated into the action project:

Communication strategies: This workshop focuses on how to get one's message across by identifying the target audience and communicating with and through the media. Scheduling this workshop on the day of the action project allows students to practice these strategies in their action project groups with reference to their specific policy agenda.

Group dynamics /leadership styles: This workshop focuses on how individual personalities and predispositions affect learning and leadership styles. The session teaches students not only about themselves, but also how and why others will approach a problem in a different way, helping students to understand and improve the dynamics within their action project groups. For New Leadership™ New Jersey 2005 we used a model based on David Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory, which was very successful in helping the students work more effectively in their group.

Student groups

As we divide the students into groups of approximately 5-6 students each, we try to ensure that each group is diverse in race, ethnicity, political orientation and educational background. Each group is assigned a particular position on the issue and a policy arena in which to operate. Although the students often have difficulty when assigned to support positions with which they strongly disagree, learning to view an issue from another's perspective and to understand the motivations and actions of the opposition are important political skills and therefore essential to the assignment.

Each student group is assigned an advisor, usually a staff member or graduate student. The role of the advisor is to help keep the group on task and to work through problems within the group. The advisors are encouraged to provide only as much assistance as necessary, allowing the students to work through challenges that arise on their own whenever possible. The project

should be student-driven and the results student-generated. Advisors should have some teaching experience. Arrange to meet with the group advisors in advance to review their roles and responsibilities, and to have them review their group's assignment.

Resources

Since the students will have little time to conduct their own research, CAWP provides information for the action project in a number of ways:

Printed materials: CAWP interns do a great deal of research in advance to identify useful articles, printed materials and web sites for each of the groups, based on their assigned positions. This material is handed out to the students when they receive the action project group assignment. We also send each student a set of introductory materials 2-3 weeks before the program, which provides a brief overview of the topic and allows them to acquaint themselves with the issue ahead of time.

Policy experts: A session including experts with different perspectives on the policy area is a great resource. The students have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify some of the issues, and discuss strengths and weaknesses of various policy proposals.

Skills building workshops: In addition to the workshops mentioned above, various workshops and exercises during the NEW Leadership™ program, such as the public speaking workshop and a session on lobbying the legislature, serve to assist the students as they work on their action project assignments.

Action Project Presentation

The political action project culminates in a presentation by each student group. In the past, the groups held mock press conferences and a prepared press releases in support of their positions on the issue. The press conference format gave the students the chance to be creative and develop their messages. This format worked very well for certain kinds of scenarios (such as a candidate announcing her run for office or a grass roots organization announcing a call for action). However, in some scenarios, there was no obvious reason that the group would hold a press conference, and a media event did not necessarily support the mission or strategy of the group.

In 2005 the students were assigned to present testimony on their positions before a mock legislative committee. This format allowed the students to learn quite a bit about legislative hearings and the roles of legislators, in addition becoming familiar with the particular policy issue.

The Political Action Project is a work in progress. We will continue to update and adapt the assignment to meet the stated goals and the needs of the students. For future assignments, we plan to consider how to build in an opportunity for students to examine the role of public opinion or the impact of national grass roots mobilization efforts on elected officials, examining how organizations can manipulate elected officials through public opinion or media campaigns.