

Get It Started

A Guide for Developing Gay-Straight Alliances

ABOUT THE COLORADO GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK



The Colorado Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Network is a program of One Colorado, a statewide organization dedicated to securing equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) Coloradans.

The Network was launched as part of a comprehensive plan to empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) and allied students to combat bullying in their schools. To support these student efforts, the Colorado GSA Network has developed tools and resources for Gay-Straight Alliances to educate their schools and communities.

Colorado GSA Network was also created to build a statewide network of Gay-Straight Alliances, to connect students from across the state, and to facilitate leadership development through regional and statewide engagement.

To learn more about the Colorado GSA Network, please visit our website at www.cogsanetwork.org or call 303-396-6443.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide serves as a resource for Gay-Straight Alliances and other student groups and organizations working to end homophobia and transphobia in schools. It seeks to provide information and guidance on creating organizational and leadership structures for new and existing student clubs, developing effective coalitions, hosting successful events, and planning for sustainable Gay-Straight Alliances.

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GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES DEFINED

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) are student-initiated and student-run clubs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students and their allies. These clubs provide a safe space for these students to meet, support each other, and educate their peers to end homophobia and transphobia in schools.

GSAs take many forms and address different issues depending on the needs of the students.

As a **social group**, a GSA can provide a space, inside and outside of school, to meet other people and participate in activities like movie nights, barbecues, and dances.

An **education**-focused GSA creates a more supportive and affirming environment for LGBTQ and allied students through peer education to bring awareness to LGBTQ issues.

Activist GSAs seek changes to better protect LGBTQ students in non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies. Activist groups also advocate for LGBTQ inclusion in class curriculum and school libraries.

In all forms, Gay-Straight Alliances play important roles in schools to create supportive communities for LGBTQ students and their allies.



STARTING A GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

Since Gay-Straight Alliances are like other noncurricular students clubs, they must follow the same guidelines and processes to get started. Use these 10 simple steps to help get your club up and running.



1 DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Starting a new club can be a process, so know exactly what the process is and follow every step. Refer to your Student Handbook to find school policies about starting new clubs. Don't forget that counselors, teachers, and other staff can be great resources to help you find the policy and explain the steps to form a new club. Some of these policies might include having a faculty/staff sponsor, creating a mission statement, or developing by-laws that include information such as the purpose of your group, leadership structure, and how often your group will meet.

2 BE PREPARED

As you're starting a new group, people might have a lot of questions, and you might experience some resistance. Know exactly why you are starting the group, and be prepared to explain its purpose in your school. Think about what's missing without the presence of a GSA and how your GSA will address that issue. Consider using stories and experiences of students who would benefit from a GSA in your school. Find allies in your community—parents, teachers, and community members who understand the need for a GSA and can speak in support of the club.

3 IDENTIFY A FACULTY ADVISOR OR GROUP OF ADVISORS

If you have identified a faculty/staff person or a group of faculty/staff who are supportive of LGBTQ students and/or issues of gender expression and gender identity, these folks may be great advocates for your GSA. They can also be helpful in getting your club established by working with your administration to support your club. If there is more than one advisor, it demonstrates broader support for the club and creates a safe and supportive network for students and staff.

4 INVOLVE YOUR ADMINISTRATION

After preparing your reasoning for a GSA and finding an advisor(s), the next step is to meet with the administrator who works with student clubs. Make sure you have followed the appropriate procedures and have all necessary information to become an established club. To better prepare for this meeting, have your members get together to brainstorm and role play different questions, answers, and explanations for the GSA.

STARTING A GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

5 IDENTIFY OTHER ALLIES

If your group is met with resistance, it is important to have allies who can advocate for your group to different members of the school or community. Ask people you think might be supportive, explain the purpose of your club, and develop relationships about your work. Brainstorm supportive groups. Do you have a Diversity Club, multicultural groups like a Black Student Alliance or a Latino Student Alliance, or programs like the No Place for Hate Campaign?

6 FIND A MEETING PLACE

After becoming established as an active noncurricular student club, you can focus on your GSA. To find a meeting place, consider the location. To maintain confidentiality and provide a safe space for students who aren't out, don't meet in a busy area. Remember, some of your members may identify as allies, LGBTQ, or may come to your meetings to learn more about their own identity, so make sure it is safe and somewhat private.

7 ADVERTISE

Now that you have a location, start to advertise to get people to your meeting. Advertise as other noncurricular student clubs do—over the loudspeaker, in school announcements, on bulletin boards, in classrooms, etc. Be creative about where and how to advertise. It can be helpful to include information about what the club does. For example, include phrases like “group to end homophobia, group to discuss LGBTQ issues in school, or a group to create a safe and affirming learning environment for LGBTQ students and their allies.”

Another great way to advertise is to talk with staff and faculty about your club. Let them know what your group is and all the details for your meeting because they might know students who are interested in attending your meeting. Also, talk with your counselors or social workers—there's a good chance they have met with students who are looking for a supportive environment that your GSA might provide.

8 PREPARE FOR YOUR FIRST MEETING

In preparation for your first meeting, consider what you'd like to do and why you're meeting. To make sure you get everything done, create an agenda. In your agenda, include the topics for discussion, how much time you are allotting to each topic, and any significant points you'd like to share with the group. See the sample meeting agenda at the back of this guide, or contact the Colorado GSA Network for help planning for your first meeting.

As you prepare, think of materials you might need to run your meeting. Remember, food is a major draw for students. Sponsors might be interested in donating food, and it is also helpful to ask local LGBTQ-friendly businesses to donate food for your meeting. For discussions at your meeting, chart paper, markers, and pens are essential materials to lead an interactive session.

9 HOLD YOUR MEETING

Since this is your first meeting, make it fun and engaging so people are excited to return and engage for the entire year. To get started, an icebreaker is a must so people get to know each other in a fun way. It can also be helpful to have everyone introduce themselves, state why they came to the meeting, and what they'd like to get from and contribute to the group for the year.

At the beginning of the meeting, establish rules and guidelines to set the tone and expectations for the group. These guidelines create a safe space where everyone can contribute, understand, and expect themselves and others to follow the guidelines.

10 PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

It's the beginning of the year, the semester, or your first meeting, and everyone is excited about the year ahead. Have a discussion about the types of activities the groups should do through the year and the ways that they can support your membership. Create a calendar with information like meeting times, events, and holidays so everyone in your group knows what is going on and when. Add to the calendar as you begin to plan events and activities for the year to allow your members to plan ahead and know what will be expected of them. In planning ahead, set a meeting and topics schedule for the year. Consider which meetings will be education/training for the membership, activity and event brainstorming or planning, or social activities for the group.

For your group to make decisions and run meetings, it is important to have a leadership structure to follow. This structure sets the expectations for your GSA leaders and members as part of the club. The models listed on the following page are a few of the common models chosen by GSAs to run their clubs effectively. Use these ideas to decide what works best for your group, and if you develop a great way to run your group, let us know!



CHOOSING A LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE FOR YOUR GSA

HIERARCHY-BASED LEADERSHIP

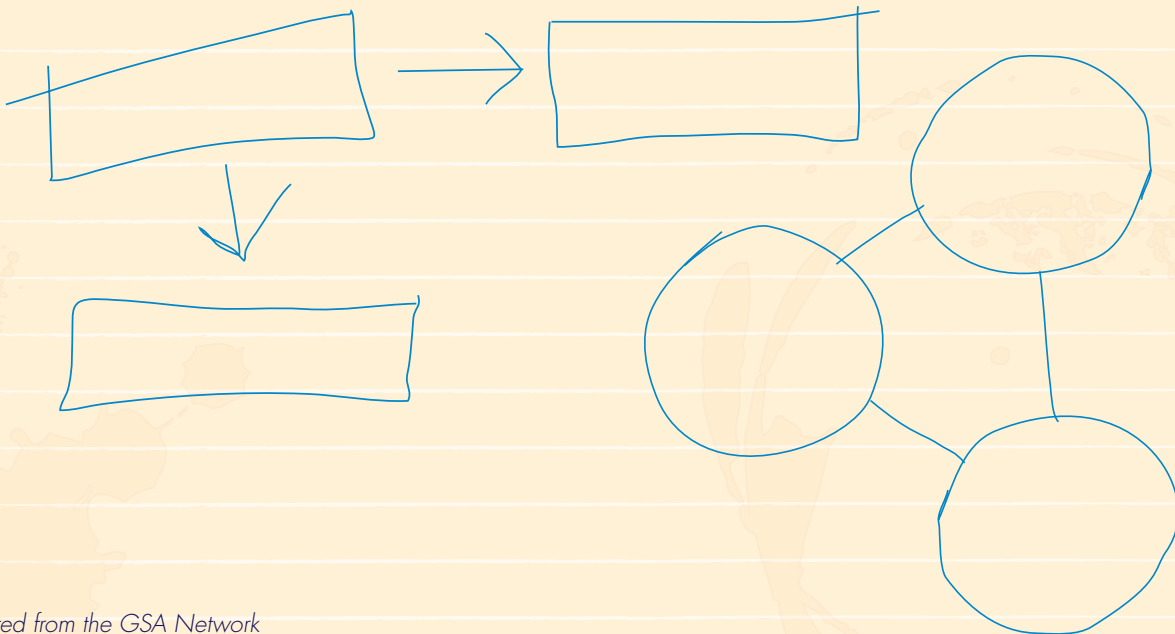
This structure includes designated roles for the organization's officers: the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, etc. This format has a clear, defined chain of responsibility for the officer team.

BOARD-BASED LEADERSHIP

Organizations with a board-based structure are driven by a group of people that serve in defined roles as members of the board. These positions—Chair, Vice Chair, Outreach Director, Programs Director, Fundraising Director, etc.—report to the larger group rather than a specific officer.

COMMITTEE-BASED LEADERSHIP

Working in committees is a great way to provide leadership opportunities in smaller groups. Within an organization, committees are formed as consistent working groups to advance the goals of the organization. These committees—Events Committee, Fundraising Committee, Outreach Committee, etc.—can meet inside and/or outside of regular meeting times. Each committee should designate a "chair," a representative that reports the committee's work to the membership and may also serve as part of the leadership team. This leadership team could consist of the Chairs from each committee.



Adapted from the GSA Network

FACILITATING GSA MEETINGS

Facilitators are in charge of the organization's meetings from the beginning to end. They are responsible for seeking input for the agenda, developing an agenda, and moving the membership through the agenda items by sharing information and making organizational decisions.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A FACILITATOR

- Being neutral, asking questions, and receiving input to work through the meeting agenda.
- Getting approval of the agenda and processes before and during the meeting.
- Moving the meeting along by focusing the group on the agenda items, while also keeping in mind guidelines and expectations of the membership.
- Guiding the group through discussion that leads to group decision-making.
- Creating a comfortable and inclusive space that encourages group participation and maintains a safe, positive, and engaging environment.
- Gauging the vibe and energy of the group.
- Setting a collaborative, supportive, and appreciative tone.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND AS A FACILITATOR

- Ask for feedback and input on the agenda before and during the meeting.
- Assign roles to share ownership over the meeting. It's helpful to have a note taker, timekeeper, etc. to keep the meeting moving. For those that would like to discuss a specific agenda item, ask them to introduce the topic and guide the conversation.
- Make notes of off-subject agenda items (a "parking lot" list) that can be discussed at a later time.
- Summarize the discussion to avoid repeating opinions and encourage discussion on points that haven't already been made. Create a non-disruptive indicator for those that agree with a speaker, like "sparkle fingers" or finger snaps.
- To keep the discussion moving forward, summarize the discussion, explain where people agree and disagree, and come to a decision.
- Ask questions.
- Encourage an interactive environment, where everyone has an opportunity to speak, and take notice if people may be holding back.
- Talk about the issues, not the person.
- If a facilitator wants to be active in the discussion, let the group know that you are speaking from a personal perspective, or have someone else facilitate the discussion.
- Before moving on, check in with the group to make sure everyone agrees on a decision.

TECHNIQUES FOR MAKING DECISIONS IN MEETINGS

- Brainstorm.
- Prioritize and rank the items.
- Discuss pros and cons.
- Take an informal straw poll to gauge how people feel.
- Seek discussion and feedback from the group.

Adapted from GSA Network & "Keep in Mind for Facilitation" by Margo Adair & Bill Aal

STRUCTURING YOUR GSA

Gay-Straight Alliances, in all their forms, create a safe and supportive community for students in schools. To decide which type of GSA best meets the needs of your membership, discuss the role of the GSA and provide a space for your members to shape the GSA. To facilitate this discussion, remember that each member has their own reasons for participating in the GSA, and a great way to retain these members is to create a GSA that provides a space they are interested and involved in.

To begin a discussion about the structure of your GSA, post the following terms in a space that is accessible for everyone to read: **Social/Support, Education, and Advocacy.**

Explain how these are common elements of many GSAs and that members will decide which elements will be integrated into their club.

Social/Support — The GSA provides a space for students to meet others, find a support network, and build community through a number of activities including movie nights, team-building activities, and bowling nights.

Education — The GSA creates a supportive and affirming environment for LGBTQ and allied students by educating their peers to bring awareness to LGBTQ issues. Activities include hosting speakers, developing trainings, hosting film/book series, sponsoring panel discussions, and expanding the LGBTQ reading library.

Advocacy — The GSA engages in events to highlight LGBTQ contributions and organizes for changes to better protect LGBTQ students in non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies. These events include participating in many of the LGBTQ national days of action (National Coming Out Day, Ally Week, Transgender Day of Remembrance, Day of Silence, etc.), strengthening school policies, creating visual/poster campaigns, and advocating for gender-inclusive bathroom spaces.

Under each category, have the group brainstorm and list the activities your GSA could participate in. It's likely many of the activities will be in more than one category. After compiling the list, have a group discussion about which activities they would like to participate in for the year. If students are having a hard time narrowing it down, create committees to take on different events or select a few from the list.



Adapted from *GLSEN and GSA for Safe Schools*

As the students share the activity ideas for the GSA, keep a tally based on the different categories. The category with the most tallies can drive the planning and programming for the year. Again, if there is a mix of the categories, use committees as part of your club. After deciding a general category for the GSA, create a mission statement that reflects this, if you haven't done so already.

Use this discussion session to plan for the year. Create a GSA calendar for the semester/year that is available to all members. Once the dates are set for events, the group can set days to plan or use committees to help with the planning. Also, refer back to this activity to make sure the group is meeting the needs of the membership's goals and mission.

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL GSA EVENTS

To start organizing an event for your GSA, create a “work plan.” This plan will help you outline and track the details that need to be taken care of, who is responsible for completing the tasks, and when they need to be completed. This document should serve as a checklist and a guide for a successful event. Here are some considerations to be outlined in your “work plan.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

Why? What do you want to get out of the event? Do you want to raise awareness, educate others, recruit new members, or keep your membership involved? This will help you set goals to plan for your event.

Who? Are you hosting a speaker or group of speakers?

What? Is the event a panel, workshop, training, or school-wide event?

When? What is the date and time for your event?

Where? Where is the location for your event?



EVENT PLANNING CONSIDERATION

Space

Make sure to choose a space that is safe for those who attend, while also having a location that is easy to find. Keep in mind the accessibility of the location for attendees in wheelchairs or with other accessibility needs.

Hearing Impaired

Identify a person who knows sign language to be inclusive of the deaf community at your event.

Language

Include additional languages in your flyers and advertisements to allow your group to reach a broader audience. Collaborate with other groups on campus and identify bilingual or multilingual supporters to assist with translation at events. When showing films, make sure to use subtitles.

Other Access Factors

To expand your event audience, be considerate of socioeconomic factors. If your location is off-campus, find a location that is accessible by public transportation or coordinate a carpool with your members. If there is an entry fee for your event, consider a sliding scale, where people pay what they can afford for the event. Another option is to have higher prices for adults than students. If possible, find a way to make your event free through fundraising or sponsorships.

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL GSA EVENTS

Goals & Objectives

As part of your work plan, consider how this project will help you reach your organizational goals. Set objectives for the event and discuss the concrete and specific ways the event helps you reach those goals.

Timeline & Delegation

Develop a planning process that includes a timeline and delegation of tasks to complete before, during, and after the event. Set deadlines to each task and assign a point person to be responsible for completing the task.

Resources

Determine what resources you will need and assign a person (or committee) to be responsible for them. For a panel or workshop, you might need materials like markers or chart paper. For a film, you might need a projector, projector screen, and speakers.

Evaluation

Decide how the event will be evaluated. Think about how the information will be collected, recorded, and used in the future.

OUTREACH & RECRUITING FOR YOUR EVENT

Advertising

As part of your work plan, consider your audience and the methods to advertise inside and outside of your school. Advertising should be broader than your GSA and include other students, staff, faculty, administrators, parents, and community members. Brainstorm the different ways to advertise in your school. Consider making announcements, placing posters on display boards, handing out flyers, and advertising in the school or community newspaper. Get creative and let us know if your group has great advertising ideas!

Organizational Partnerships

Find an opportunity to develop relationships with other clubs by co-sponsoring an event to address issues that are important to your club. Co-sponsorship can take many forms, including giving financial resources and contributing time to the event. Remember to share credit for the event and acknowledge the partnership to maintain a working relationship for the future.

Documentation

Remember to document all the work for the event. Documentation can be an effective tool for future planning and can also be useful to pass details on to group members who could not attend your planning sessions. This information is also a great resource to pass on to new leaders in your GSA.

SUSTAINING YOUR GSA THROUGH LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

Since GSAs improve the learning environment for LGBTQ and allied students in schools, it is important that these clubs continue to grow and build on the previous year's work. To avoid starting from scratch year after year, develop a plan in your club to transition your leadership. Also, set clear expectations for leaders and members so everyone knows what to expect to keep the GSA active and always planning ahead. Here are some useful tips for successful leadership transitions.

TRANSITION YOUR LEADERSHIP

After your officer elections, have a retreat or meeting with the outgoing and incoming leadership teams. The outgoing leadership team should discuss their experience as a member of the officer team, sharing things that were learned or that were challenging and offering some new solutions or suggestions as ways things could have gone differently. If there are documents or other information that needs to stay with the GSA, make sure to give that information to the new leadership team as they step into their new roles. The incoming leadership team should ask questions, listen, and find a way to make use of the information.



DEVELOP A MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

One of the best ways to learn the ins and outs of a club is to experience it first-hand. Include 1st and 2nd year students in your leadership team to cultivate and develop new leaders. Consider using a shadowing program to teach young leaders about the responsibilities of each office and to provide opportunities to facilitate meetings or chair different committees in your organization. If you have some great ways that you mentor and develop your leaders, let us know!

DOCUMENT EVERY MEETING

Designate a notetaker for each meeting. This can be a role for a member of the leadership team or a responsibility that can change every meeting. It's helpful to have information to refer back to so your group can expand on previous ideas and provide information to students who could not attend your meeting. Your group can also designate a Historian to keep track of posters, flyers, photos, and any other organizational materials to archive the activities and history of your GSA.

FUNDRAISING FOR YOUR GSA

Funding can be a useful tool for a GSA. Funds can help your group advertise or offer group activities such as field trips, conferences, or food for meetings. Below, we've shared just a few of the many ideas you could use to fundraise. If you have ideas you'd like to share, let us know!

SETTING UP A STUDENT CLUB ACCOUNT

Learn your school's policies about student club finances. You'll want to learn how to set up a bank account, to decide who the donations will be made out to, and to establish a process to ensure donations are getting into the student club account by the appropriate people. Also, decide who will be authorized to sign checks and manage the account.

CLUB EVENTS

Aside from bringing awareness to your group through engaging with different audiences, events are also great ways to fundraise. Partner with other school organizations for an event. Consider inviting students involved in theater, band, or choir to host a performance. Your group can write a play based on issues like bullying, homophobia, or transphobia to educate your school.

Another opportunity to fundraise is to host an event at your school. Consider asking local artists, speakers, and authors to volunteer to host a fundraiser for your club. Hosting a community-wide event is a great way to educate the public about the work that your GSA does and to network with people in the community.

SCHOOL FUNDING

Work with your advisor, supportive teachers, or other student clubs to find out if there are funding opportunities through your school. Aside from money, find out if your school gives student clubs access to other resources, such as copiers, printers, event space, etc. These resources can support the operational expenses of your organization.

MEMBERSHIP FUNDRAISING

Members of your group can make individual asks of their networks, including friends, family members, and co-workers. Share with these individuals the work that your GSA does, emphasizing the impact it has on your school, and tell stories about the support the GSA provides its members. It's also helpful to fundraise for something specific. For example, "Our group needs to raise \$100 for our Day of Silence materials; can you support our group's event?"

As a club, there are many ways to raise funds with your entire membership. Not only are bake sales, car washes, and raffles great ways to raise money, but they are also great team-building exercises for your group. Another membership fundraising idea is to make and sell GSA schwag, items like bracelets, t-shirts, stickers, and buttons.

FUNDRAISING FOR YOUR GSA

FUNDRAISING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Many businesses donate portions of their profits to non-profit groups. Collaborate with a business to set a date and time and then advertise to get people to the event to benefit your group. Another way to involve a business is to ask for donations. For example, ask a local restaurant to sponsor the food for your GSA meeting.

Community organizations may also offer small grants to your group. When applying, follow the instructions carefully and be specific about your funding needs. Describe the project, why it's important, and what impact the funding will have. In your application, be genuine and personalize it to make your proposal unique. Before submitting your proposal, make sure that you have included all the information requested and that all the information is complete and up-to-date. Be thorough and detailed to help funders know that their money is managed well and that their funding has lasting impacts.

COLORADO GSA NETWORK GRANT PROGRAM

The Colorado GSA Network is another opportunity to be funded for various GSA projects, including t-shirts, events, books, or films. For more information on the Grant Program and for application information, please visit Colorado GSA Network's website at www.cogsanetwork.org.



BUILDING COALITIONS

A coalition is an “organization of organizations” that unites around a common issue and a clear goal(s). A coalition also refers to groups of diverse individuals or organizations of individuals who are involved in other groups.

GUIDING QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN BUILDING A COALITION

- What is your unifying issue(s)?
- What resources could come from the organization?
- What are some potential obstacles to the partnership?

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL COALITION BUILDING

- **Choose Unifying Issues** — Since coalitions form around common issues, make sure all members of the group establish the coalition’s goals through an inclusive and collaborative process. *Be aware of “wedge issues,” issues that are deliberately manipulated to cause a split or conflict between groups. Oftentimes, it can be distracting and drive your coalition away from your unifying issue(s).*
- **Understand and Respect Each Member’s Self Interest** — Organizations join coalitions because they also have goals and needs as part of the work of their individual groups.
- **Respect Each Group’s Internal Process** — Organizations have different leadership and decision-making structures, so commit to learn and respect these structures to better understand the unique contributions of each member organization.
- **Agree to Disagree** — There will be issues not every member agrees with, but acknowledge them and let your unifying issue drive the partnership.
- **Establish a Clear Decision-Making Structure** — Through an inclusive and collaborative process, decide how your coalition will make decisions and how the leadership will be structured.
- **Share Credit Fairly** — Each organization brings different, yet important, contributions to the group, so make sure to acknowledge what everyone brings.
- **Give and Take** — Building genuine and lasting relationships are most important for coalitions. Expect to give as much as you ask for in the coalition.
- **Develop a Common Strategy** — After choosing your unifying issue(s) and establishing goals, set a coalition strategy. Agree on the tactics of the coalition; otherwise, tactics should be carried out on behalf of individual organizations rather than the coalition.
- **Be Strategic** — Strong and successful coalitions include strategic partners. Be mindful of organizations involved, how they become involved, and what a long-term partnership looks like for all members.
- **Be Consistent** — The members of your coalition should attend every meeting to make sure the interests of the coalition and individual organizations are represented. It also strengthens the relationships of coalition members.
- **Formalize the Coalition** — Establish clear and explicit expectations and responsibilities for the coalition and each of its members. This understanding holds organizations accountable and prevents future conflicts.



APPENDIX: SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA (1 HOUR)

I. Introduction & Welcome (5 Minutes)

II. Icebreaker (10 Minutes)

- a. Name
- b. Reason for Coming to GSA
- c. What They'd Like to Get Out of and Contribute to the Group
- d. Personal Goals for the Group

III. Ground Rules (5 Minutes)

- a. Members Discuss What Guidelines Should Exist for Safe Space
 - i. Respect
 - ii. One Person Talks at a Time
 - iii. Confidentiality – What's Said in the Group, Stays in the Group
 - iv. No Assumptions
 - v. Use "I" Statements

IV. What the Group Should Do (10 Minutes)

- a. How Should the Group Operate?
 - i. Activist, Social, Education
 - ii. Combination of the Three?

V. Leadership Structure (15 Minutes)

- a. Reflections on Leadership (5 Minutes)
 - i. What are Qualities of a Good Leader?
- b. Leadership Needs for your Group (5 Minutes)
 - i. What are the Expectations/Needs of GSA Leaders/Members
- c. Decide on Leadership Structure (5 Minutes)
 - i. Hierarchy vs. Committee vs. Board

VI. Compile a Calendar (10 Minutes)

- a. Meetings
 - i. How Often?
 - ii. Certain Day of the Week/Month?
- b. LGBTQ Holiday & Events
 - i. Awareness Events & Activities
- c. Discussion Topics
 - i. What are the Topics of Each Meeting?

VII. Closing with Announcements for Next Meeting (5 Minutes)

Adapted from the GSA Network & GLSEN

ALLIES

ADVOCACY

SUPPORT

THIS RESOURCE
GUIDE WAS DEVELOPED
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

EVENTS



FRIENDS

NETWORK

EDUCATION