

Welcome to the Secular Student Alliance!

Before we begin, thank you for deciding to form a new Secular Student Alliance group on your campus! We realize there are many important issues to dedicate yourself to, and many existing campus clubs dedicated to those issues. Your choice to put time and effort into building a secular community on your campus, and creating a more secular world, is especially meaningful to us. We will do everything we can to help make your SSA group a reality!

This guide is intended to provide step-by-step guidance to get past the most daunting part of running a group: starting one. We have many services and resources to help you as your school year continues, but this guide deals strictly with the first few weeks up until the first meeting. Most of this is administrative paperwork, basic group-running setup, and understanding how the SSA can help you. For some, this may seem like common-sense information. If it is, great! But we *still* suggest that you take a look through this guide in case we cover anything you might not have thought of on your own. This is built specifically for new leaders who don't have previous organizing experience, which is probably many of you. By the end of this guide, you will have gone from having a great idea to being a prepared leader.

Throughout this process, there is one thing to keep in mind: TALK TO US! This guide is intended to be as comprehensive as possible, with little to no fluff or filler, so you can get right to the information you need most. However, it's no substitute for experience, something our Campus Organizers have in spades! They have the knowledge and experiences of every SSA group that has existed since 2000. No situation is unique, so don't try to reinvent the wheel! Our Campus Organizers are paid to make the success of your group their top priority. They are never too busy to respond to an email or take a call. If you need help, whether or not the answer is written in this guide, you should always feel empowered to talk to us.

With that, let's begin this journey...

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So, you want to be a new leader

Being a leader is incredibly rewarding and builds practical knowledge for any career path you're entering after college. The downside is that it means many tasks, including the most difficult ones, will fall on your shoulders. You will be the proverbial heart and soul of the group, and it will live or die based on your leadership. People will look up to you, expect you to know answers to difficult questions, and be more likely to hold you accountable for your failures than congratulate you on your successes. You will have to do much more work, dedicate much more time, and deal with many more stresses, regardless of your delegation skills or the quality of your officers. These are the realities of the job you're about to undertake, and it is unrealistic to go into this expecting it to be easy.

However, none of this is unmanageable, and hundreds of students have gone from knowing nothing about organizing to creating groups that are now bedrocks of their campuses. All it requires is dedication, perseverance, and a little help from others. This is the first mental barrier you need to get past in order to continue, as taking advantage of the rest of this guide will hinge upon your willingness to take responsibility, deal with bureaucracies, and handle tasks on your own. If you look at that list as challenges to overcome rather than obstructions to be dreaded, then you'll do great as a leader.

First Steps

Online Presence

The SSA requires a group to establish an online presence in order to become an affiliate. A fact of the 21st century is that most people interact with the world online in at least some capacity, and especially through social media. While we will discuss outreach methods for the physical world, you must have a way for people to find you on the internet. We are, however, very flexible on what medium you choose to use, and you must decide what you believe will be most accessible way for your potential group members to both find you and follow you to get information about events, *and* what medium you are best able to access on a regular basis. Here is a list of services we recommend, in descending order

1. **Facebook Groups:** At the moment, Facebook is the largest social media platform and the one on which most people have personal accounts. Facebook Groups are the **best** way for members to interact with each other, and are very easy to transfer when new leadership is elected. Campus Organizers are also able to interact with your group more easily and directly share links that may be of interest to your group. You can create and share events, moderate content, and share content of interest to the group; members will

receive notifications when people post; and Facebook Groups are free. You can also change the privacy settings to *Private* or *Secret* so that members who prefer not to be out to certain friends can share safely inside the group. The *Private* setting is recommended, as it makes the group discoverable to prospective members while protecting the content from outside viewers, and gives moderators control over who has access to the group. However, people can see the names of members of the group, even if they can't see what they are posting, which may be a problem for group members who do not want to advertise their membership in the group. The *Secret* setting takes care of this, but also makes the group impossible to find through a search, eliminating that means of attracting potential new members. **Never use email-locked Facebook groups that require ".edu" accounts**, because they are restricted to people on your campus, limiting your reach and potential success. Journalists, potential off-campus donors, and students from nearby campuses won't be able to reach out to or participate in your group.

2. **Facebook Pages:** Where Facebook Groups allow for privacy, Facebook Pages are *always* public. They are best for sharing announcements and content, promoting public events that members can share, and being discoverable to a wider audience. The downside is that, along with not providing members a forum for interaction, Facebook's algorithm can hurt the chances of people who "like" the page from seeing its content in their newsfeeds unless they interact with the Page regularly or proactively change their feed settings for the Page. Pages are best used in tandem with Facebook Groups, so that you can have a nice mixture of public and private presences. Keep information about the Group as a pinned post on your page so that visitors can find it easily.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Both Facebook Groups and Facebook Pages let you change their URL. We recommend doing this ASAP so that you can include a short, clean URL on advertisements. Keep it consistent between the Group and the Page, and simple, often just the group acronym. Example: facebook.com/SSAatABC

3. **Web Pages/Blogs:** Like Facebook Pages, these are great public presence tools, and give you much more control over content than a social media page does. These can be great for groups that are well established on campus and work like a well-oiled machine, but we do not recommend them for new groups. Groups can publish content on their web pages, design them to draw material from multiple sources of information, and create them to look more professional than pages based on social media templates. However, they are one step removed when it comes to encouraging regular engagement with members who are on social media, unless their content is shared on those platforms *and/or* those members decide to visit the web pages. What's more, if a blog looks inactive, it reflects poorly on your group. A leader should be specifically tasked with updating your blog on a regular basis. A website can also be hard for some new leaders to manage unless they have HTML or website-editing abilities, even with drag-and-drop websites.

4. **Meetup, Twitter, and other social media outlets:** It is good to have a presence on other social media outlets in addition to Facebook, as it provides the opportunity to attract potential members who prefer them. However, none are as popular as Facebook, and the others don't offer the same level of group interaction. Meetup focuses on scheduling group events and not on online discussions. Twitter is popular, but lacks the capacity to organize events other than as shares from other platforms. Like Pages, Meetup and Twitter should be used in tandem with a Facebook group, but not as your primary online presence.

Email Address

Despite the popularity of social media, email is still a baseline method of communication, and your group is required to have an email address in order to become an SSA Affiliate. A group email must be just that: a *group* email, not a personal one. This means we will not accept your student email or personal email from Gmail, Yahoo, etc., as your official group email account. You must have one set up for your group that will be transferred between old and new leadership each time it changes. Some schools will provide a group email when you become recognized on campus, but you should be prepared to create one yourself if your school doesn't. We can create an email forward for you, if you prefer not to manage a separate email account.

SSA Email Forwards

We highly recommend using the SSA email forward that your Campus Organizer will create for you when you apply for SSA affiliation. This will automatically forward emails sent to your group address address to your personal or student email account so you do not need to check the group account separately. The SSA will transfer the forward to the new leadership and discontinue messages going to you if you request it, submit a leadership update, or change leaders in an Affiliation Renewal. This minimizes the work all of you have to do, while continuing to provide you with a professional-looking group email. The email address will usually look like the extension of your school (for example, ppcc.edu) attached to an SSA handle (ex: ppcc@secularstudents.org).

SSA Affiliation

As we already mentioned, groups wanting to be affiliated with the SSA must have a web presence and a group email. We also require groups to agree to our minimum standards and to understand that to remain affiliated, they must fill out an Affiliation Renewal twice a year (once in the spring and once in the fall). Optionally, new or current groups using SSA branding may submit a roster of their members' names and emails to become an SSA Chapter, granting the group additional and exclusive resources.

Benefits of SSA Affiliation

Affiliation with the SSA comes with many benefits, including our Resources and Services.

Our Resources are publicly available guidance in the form of emails, activity packets, guides, libraries, and everything else on our website. These are available for anyone to access and learn from to apply to their own group, often based on the ideas and experiences of other groups around the country!

Our Services, however, are only accessible to SSA Affiliates, and some are exclusively available to Chapters.

Services

Campus Organizers

Our Campus Organizers are staff dedicated primarily to the success of you and your group. They are there to give you advice and hands-on help as you need it. When you apply for affiliation, your Campus Organizer will introduce themselves to you and guide you through the process both with us and with your school. After that, they will be there to take your calls or emails, correspond with you, and help you navigate events and problems.

Speakers Bureau

We have a huge selection of speakers who have agreed to speak with our student groups for a discounted rate or for free! These may be celebrities, professors, and other experts who can talk or debate about a wide array of topics. Along with offering you easy access to these speakers, we can also provide Speakers Bureau funding to help cover the costs of travel and lodging associated with bringing a speaker to your campus. These can't cover honorariums, but many of our speakers do not charge one, or are willing to negotiate based on the needs and abilities of your group. Most funding is given on a reimbursement basis, so that in the end, your group spends zero dollars of your own budget. However, special considerations can be made to give groups advance funding based on need and urgency.

Project Grants

This is money we will give you to run a special event! Free money! These grants are provided in advance, to help get large projects off the ground. We offer grants for special events like fundraisers or conferences, in amounts from \$250 to \$1,000, depending on the event you're

proposing. Such grants are not given to cover operational costs. Funding can also be requested in order for you and your group to attend SSA Con each year! While we encourage you to use primarily those campus funding methods available to you, which will be able to provide funds more quickly and in larger amounts, SSA grants are great for supplementing costs the campus funding won't cover, or to use for smaller events if it is limited.

Tabling Supplies

These are free supplies you can obtain from us to hand out to students that visit your table at campus events while you tell them about your group. These include pens, stickers, brochures, buttons, posters, chalk, bracelets, and seasonal items for special events like Darwin Day or Ask an Atheist Day. We also give SSA-branded groups a vinyl banner to put in front of their table! SSA Chapters can receive as many orders of tabling supplies as they need each semester, while Affiliates only get one order per semester.

Group Business Cards

Business cards contain all relevant contact information for your group, and you will be provided enough to give out liberally. These are great to give to people who express interest in your group at your table, at various events, or on the spur of the moment, so that when they depart they will have all the information they need to find the group and join later. This Service is exclusive to SSA Chapters.

501(c)(3) Tax-Exempt Status

The SSA has the ability to extend tax-exempt status to qualifying groups. Many groups make the mistake of assuming they are a non-profit simply by being a student group, and therefore entitled to tax exemption. This is not accurate! Your group is not tax-exempt unless you have been legally granted 501(c)(3) status. If you are unsure if you have 501(c)(3) status, it is 99.9999% likely that you have not received it. By applying for 501(c)(3) status through the National SSA, you will bypass the associated fees and greatly reduce your time investment. This Service is exclusive to SSA Chapters.

Group-Running Guides

We have two major guides that, more than any other resource, will help you run your group successfully. The New Leaders Guide is a comprehensive book that will detail everything you need to know about running your group after the affiliation process. If you only read one of our resources, this should be it. The Advanced Leaders Guide is tailored to those who already have some group-running experience and would like to make their existing group even more awesome than it already is. Most likely, if you are reading this guide, it will be a while until you will need to check out that one. Both guides are available in full to read online, but only SSA Chapters may receive a physical copy.

Requirements

As stated above, the only requirements for initial affiliation with the SSA are (1) acceptance of our Minimum Standards; (2) a web presence; and (3) a group email address. There are two other qualifications to remain affiliated with us.

Affiliation Renewals

We run two Affiliation Renewals each year: one in March or April for the spring semester, and one in mid-October for the fall semester. This is our main way of obtaining updated information for your group, and is the only thing groups must do to remain affiliated with the SSA and continue to be eligible for our support. Groups that do not re-affiliate during this time will be assumed to be inactive, and all support from us will cease. The group will be removed from our national listing, meaning that students or press will not be able to find information about your group on our website. The Affiliate Renewal form simply asks for current leader and advisor information, as well as some statistics about your group. If you have changed primary contact information, by using a new email address or switching your preferred web presence, we will update that as well. Some questions also help us evaluate the strength of your group, so that if necessary we can contact you and go over strategies to help your group improve.

Rosters

Submitting a roster grants your group SSA Chapter status if you are at a college in the United States. It's easiest to send us the roster during the Affiliation Renewal, but this can also be done at any time you want to change your status. The people on the roster will be made SSA Student Members, and will occasionally receive emails from us regarding secular issues and engagement. We do not sell or give away any of this information, even to partner organizations, and members may opt out of our mailing list at any time. However, we prefer that the roster you submit be comprised of members who have opted into being listed, or at least are part of your core membership.

Becoming Official on Campus

Being recognized will often give your group access to certain benefits, including free room reservations, access to AV equipment, the ability to table and post flyers, discounted large event space, financial assistance, and so on. Each college campus is different in what it requires for groups to form and remain in good standing, so while what is discussed here is generally required, it may not be the exact procedure you will encounter at your school. The best thing is to go to your campus organization office and get a written list of requirements. Making sure to

have a written copy provided by the office cannot be emphasized enough, as anti-atheist discrimination still happens, and some less-than-friendly administrators may change or manipulate the rules on you, and you will not be able to challenge them if you don't have a hard copy of them. It is important to be absolutely sure of the rules and to follow them exactly as they are stated. This is the first and most important rule. Fulfill every deadline, match every number, provide all necessary documents, attend all meetings, etc. The importance of educating yourself about these requirements cannot be stressed enough: There have been instances where miscommunication has prevented a group from forming for an entire term. Groups rarely survive without official recognition, so you must pursue it diligently, and keep us updated if you are having issues. If your private school does not grant official recognition, we still want to support the group—just keep us updated on your situation.

Equal Access Act (20 U.S. Code § 4071)

The Equal Access Act requires that any secondary school (such as high schools) receiving federal funding treat your group the same as it treats any other non-curricular group. Specifically, this means that your school cannot add, remove, or otherwise alter their requirements for starting a group when you approach them. For example, if your school requires ten student signatures and an advisor, and administrators ask you for fifteen signatures instead, that extra requirement is a violation of the Equal Access Act. Again, having written guidelines in hand at the earliest possible time will help you avoid trouble and assist us if we need to get involved. Contact us immediately if you suspect your group is encountering undue resistance. Much of the time, you may legitimately be missing an important and stated requirement; if not, we can intervene on your behalf.

Private Schools

Since private schools aren't run by the state or primarily funded by the state, they have much more control over student rights and their limits. They can deny your group the ability to be recognized or even form for any or no reason, and there is no legal recourse if they do so. Some groups have gotten officially recognized by becoming more philosophical in nature, or rewording their proposal language to be more in line with the values of the school. Others have formed rogue groups that continue to meet off-campus and simply deal with the lack of access and potential repercussions from the school. The prerogative is yours, but we will offer support however we can, regardless of your group's status.

Constitution and Bylaws

The constitution and/or bylaws are the rules that govern your group, and every group needs to have some. Most schools have sample copies in their preferred format, but we also have a standard format available if they don't. These laws detail leadership structure, member

qualifications, the financial expenditure process, and many other operations that need to happen for your group to run smoothly. Your school may have specific requirements about what kind of governing documents your group needs, though often they only need a constitution, and bylaws can exist solely for your group. Your bylaws and your constitution must be in line with the policies and requirements of your campus, especially if you are trying to become a recognized group.

Constitutions should be concise, yet contain the important framework of an organization. It is a summary of group structure and why your group exists, but does not detail every inner working of your organization. Some constitutions come with a letter from the founders outlining their intent for the group, which may help future generations keep to its mission and purpose. Constitutions are meant to be stable, having difficult but not impossible requirements in order to amend or change them, such as the agreement of two-thirds of the group's officers or an 80%-majority group vote on each proposed change.

Bylaws are the inner working procedures and processes of an organization. They are usually easier to change, requiring only a simple majority rather than the two-thirds vote often required to amend a constitution. Some topics may be mentioned in the constitution, and then covered in much more detail in the bylaws. They also contain procedural guidance, such as the number of officers required for a quorum, so that you can conduct business in an orderly manner.

Find in-depth constitution and bylaws examples at secularstudents.org/newgroup.

Additional Officers

Some schools require a specific number of student signatures to show interest before recognizing a group, or want the group to have a few officers already in place. Often, these officers will be the first few people you find out are interested in your group. It's a good idea to try to get officers as soon as possible anyway, so that you can delegate tasks. Some campuses will not let you hang flyers or table until you've become a recognized group, hindering some of your ability to collect that interest, but there are ways around this. You can try asking on a campus-specific forum or Facebook group if anyone at the school is an atheist and would be interested in helping to form an SSA group. Secular-friendly professors may know of other students on campus that they could put you in contact with. Just creating a Facebook page specifically targeted to your school will let people who are actively searching for such a group contact you. There may also be free and accessible campus-specific communications that your campus organization office can recommend. If there are student-focused businesses around your campus, such as coffee shops or restaurants, they often allow flyers to be posted on a community board, which is a good option, especially if you are not yet able to post flyers on your campus.

Finding an Advisor

Public schools may not legally require an advisor for a group and use a requirement for an advisor for a group as a means of preventing it from being able to form; they must assign an advisor to the group if they do require an advisor of all groups. However, having an advisor is not a bad idea, because they can be very helpful in navigating campus procedures, and provide your group and its next leaders with some institutional memory after you've graduated. When approaching a potential advisor, keep in mind the goals and mission of your group in case they ask. You might also want to have your group's constitution on hand if needed. Places to look for a potential advisor include the chaplain's office or an office that works with minority/religious student groups; science departments; and humanities departments (such as religious studies, history, or philosophy). If you are having trouble on a college campus, speak to your student organization's support office for more ideas or help.

Student Group Hearing

Your campus may require you to justify your group's existence to a panel of the student governing body to demonstrate how your group fits within the core values of the institution. The hearing may often end up being just a formality, but those with a religious bias may use it to deny your group official recognition. It's important to prepare ahead of time, making sure every requirement is met and all paperwork is filled out entirely, and that you are ready for any line of questioning, so that you can pass this hearing. Keep in mind that public schools cannot deny your group approval if you otherwise meet all standard requirements for formation.

Dress Well

First impressions still matter, and regardless of how much you may feel out of place in socially expected attire, not meeting that expectation will hurt your chances. Wearing a colander, a t-shirt with an atheist slogan, Darwin Fish jewelry, etc., while valid expressions of our identity, may be seen as antagonistic or anti-religious to some, painting you as a hate group in their eyes from the start. While this is unfair, it is not uncommon. For the success of your group, do your best to appear visually neutral, within reason.

Know our Secular Values

On the SSA "About" page, we list our **Mission, Vision, and Values**. Likewise, the **Minimum Standards** that groups must accept to become affiliated with the SSA contain language that will work well for you. In essence, the purpose of the SSA is not to exist merely as a contrarian religious group, or to harass any religious groups, but to build communities and to fulfill our own needs as people with secular identities. Some members may harbor ill will towards religion as a

result of having been deeply and negatively affected by it. However, your group should exist to explore your members' own worldviews, develop their own values, and critically examine the world to arrive at their own conclusions. We exist to form a community for secular students, to advocate for causes relating to our values, to do service for our community, and to educate our members and interested parties about our identity and values. Your members should feel empowered to share their negative (or even positive) feelings about religion, but this should not be the primary public depiction of your group.

Multiculturalism and Diversity

Student affairs offices are very accepting of the concept of pluralism. Emphasize that including secular students in the campus community makes the college more open and welcoming to potential and current students. It may also help your cause if you find religious people who support you, and yes, they do exist. Try your campus' multicultural department, an interfaith group like Interfaith Youth Core, a chaplain's office, or ask friends. Finally, don't let the existence of other nonreligious individuals or groups define your own. You are there to represent your group, not the tweets or books of a famous atheist or the actions of another current or former nonreligious group on the campus. **Data and studies also help to provide context for the needs of secular students on campus.** We have also worked with the **Interfaith Youth Core** on how to incorporate the secular worldview into interfaith dialogue, which may help you with framing or clarifying points.

Be Polite and Patient

A simple smile works wonders. It is also a good idea in general to be kind to everyone you come in contact with, because you never know exactly who may hurt or help you in the future. Insulting someone, even offhandedly, will hurt your chances. The process can also be long and tedious. An unexpected turn of events can lead to a long battle. Persistence is key here. Some groups have to apply several times before they are finally recognized.

Be Organized and Use Evidence

One student should be assigned to be a public speaker for the group. Records of everything you say and do should be kept, dated, filed, and available upon request with little searching. Have multiple copies of paperwork or correspondence that can be given out, while you keep the original for yourself. The more evidence you are able to present, rather than just saying "trust me," the more it will work in your favor. Having a paper trail (and an e-trail) can also be useful if someone in your campus administration tries to throw up roadblocks by claiming something wasn't filed properly or that they never received a needed document, etc.

Student Activity Fair

Once you've been recognized by your school and have affiliated with the SSA, your next primary objective is promoting your group. The first week of school is really important, because that's when many new students find the groups they want to be a part of for the next four years. Student organization activity fairs, usually hosted within the first few weeks of a semester, will be the primary events for putting your organization in front of students as they make their choices, and are an opportunity to give your group an important boost in membership and visibility. As a new group, you should start to plan for this event on your campus as soon as possible, even if you haven't been confirmed yet, so that you'll be ready for it when you are. In the future, you'll want to plan four to six weeks before the end of the previous semester.

Running a Table

You will require from two to four volunteers to run the table at all times, so the total number needed will depend on the length of the fair. In many ways, the table you use for the tabling fair will look like ones you would run for normal promotions: SSA tabling supplies, SSA banner, tablecloth, email sign-up sheets, business cards, etc. However, you also want to make your table stand out from the crowd. Many groups use candy as an incentive, which is a good idea, but we also know you can go bigger and better than just adding a candy bowl. A "draw" is something that will get people to approach your group, regardless of whether or not they are interested in your group's purpose. This can be interactive, like a white board with a question or a game; a gimmick, like funny costumes or signs; attention-grabbing, like a display or artwork; or incentivizing, like designed cupcakes or a prize giveaway. The more people you can draw over, the more you can talk to about your group, and get members you might never have had. Be creative! This is your table's time to shine.

Pitching the Group

When people are interested in your table, they'll next need to be persuaded to join your group. Having available a signup sheet and information, for example on business cards, are low-risk asks, and should not be relied on as a metric for how many people have joined. Remember: People have limited time and energy, and will always go with the option that is most compelling to them. They won't show up if another group sounds more fun, does more activities, is more in line with their values, and/or provides better opportunities for personal and professional growth. This means you need know how to talk about the group and what you'll be doing: Know your meeting time and place and what the topic/event will be that week. Also have some other

activities lined up, like a community service project, a major event, or a social outing, so that prospective members can see there's more to your group than talking.

Ask yourself these questions, then answer out loud: What is the mission of the group? Why am I in this group? What do I want to get out of the group? What is the group doing in the next two weeks? Now, try to combine all of your answers into a 30-second pitch. This is known as an "elevator pitch": If you had to pitch an idea to the executive of a company, but the only time you'd ever have with them is the elevator ride you're sharing right now, you only have from the time the elevator doors close to the time they open again to interest them in continuing the discussion. The key word in all of that is "interest." When someone comes to your table and asks, "What's this group about?" you want to be able to get them interested enough either to continue discussing the group in more depth, or to sign up. While a good pitch isn't guaranteed to bring every person who visits your table into the group, it will 1) save *you* time, and 2) save *them* time. If your best pitch wasn't enough to convince them to join your group, a continued discussion probably won't help either. Likewise, some people feel obligated to stand and listen even though they've already made the decision that they aren't interested in the group, so don't waste their time (and yours) with a long-winded explanation with no end. Your pitch will evolve with time as you figure out which details are important and which grab people's attention, and will soon become second nature as you table more! Don't get bogged down with a single person or allow yourself to miss opportunities to speak to other passers-by.

Tabling 101

While the student organization activity fair will be when you get the most attention, and the best time to go all out with decorations, the basics of tabling remain the same wherever you do it.

1. **Find a good time.** Tabling every day is hard on volunteers and produces few results. We recommend putting your energy into tabling Mondays and Tuesdays for the first 6-8 weeks of each semester. Some students take classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while others have Tuesday and Thursday classes, and of course many more mix it up. Those two days will help you catch the most students. The first 6-8 weeks are also when people are most open to new opportunities, and are open to joining a group. After that, tests, reading, and papers generally pile up, and while you may get a few interested people later on, in general your window of opportunity will have closed.
2. **Find a good place.** Some campuses dictate where tabling can take place, while others may let you choose. If you have a choice, find the place with the most foot traffic, like building entrances or popular destinations. If you have to reserve a certain table for a certain area, do it as soon as you possibly can to get the best placement before another group takes it. If you go outside, remember to have the proper gear, like canopies and water bottles. Always follow campus policy.

3. **Be prepared.** Most tabling supplies you need, minus the table, will fit in an average tote bag. You want to make sure you have signup forms so people can get emails about events, and business cards so people have all your contact information. You should also have your SSA tabling supplies goodies to give away, a tablecloth for your table, SSA banner, and display materials like books or signs.
4. **Be staffed.** Some groups have trouble finding volunteers to staff tables. This can be helped by having half-hour blocks to sign up for (Google Drive is an easy way to manage this). When people can visualize a discrete commitment, they may be more willing to sign up for a certain block of time based on their schedule than if you did an open call and waited to see who took the initiative (hint: no one will). Don't be afraid to ask members directly to help—this will always be more successful than just sending a general ask into the void.
5. **Be attentive.** Make eye contact with people, smile, and present open body language to show you're ready to talk. If you are looking at a computer or phone or doing homework, people are less likely to approach, so save it for the lull times when most classes are in session.
6. **Be nice!** A positive demeanor can go a long way in encouraging people to keep talking, come to your meeting, or even in changing their minds. Of course, use appropriate judgment for people who are being jerks or hostile.
7. **Be engaging!** While the incredible display you had at the fair was great, it's not necessarily needed for regular tabling. However, a smaller engagement, like a whiteboard or a line of books at the edge of the table, is easy to carry and will still give you natural conversation starters.
8. **Follow up.** When you're finished, send an email to the people who signed up that day, welcoming them to the group. This simple gesture can be the difference between someone joining or not. After that, you can add them to your larger list.
9. **Thank your volunteers.** Give shout-outs to the people that helped, even if they regularly table. It may seem small to you, but can mean the world to the group member.
10. **BE SAFE!** If someone is harassing you or another group member and will not back down, or if you feel unsafe for any reason, ask them politely to move on so that you can speak to other passers-by. If they refuse and you continue to feel unsafe or threatened, call campus security or the police. Never leave yourself or other members in danger.

Tabling Design

A standard table, at the minimum, has a tablecloth, SSA tabling supplies, and an email signup sheet. Of course, your table will always be more successful the more attractive and interactive it

is, whether it's for a student activity fair, special event, or for regular promotion. Here are some designs other groups have used, to inspire your own!



Advertising on Campus

Tabling is the best form of advertising you can do. However, you can't do it all the time, nor can you be everywhere on campus. It's important to utilize other forms of promotion on campus so that you can reach as many people as possible. Because many of these forms of advertising are unsupervised, they will be more prone to vandalism. Keep track of when that happens and report it to your school and us as soon as possible.

Flyers

Flyers are simple 8.5 x 11-inch paper advertisements for your group. They can be cheaply and quickly produced without going to a printer, don't require a lot of design expertise, and can be hung anywhere. Many campuses have bulletin boards or hallway inserts where you can put these, though some require approval or only allow so many flyers from each group to be hung in the building (always check to keep your group out of trouble).

We recommend being creative and bold when designing your flyer, and to use bright colors if you can afford color printing. Utilize about 70% of the flyer's space to convey your group's message or slogan. This can be a question like "Don't believe in God? You're not alone," or something fun, like "Best Goddamned Group on Campus!" The remaining 30% will be your group's information, such as your name, email, shortened web presence URL, and regular meeting time and place if they've been established. You could create a flyer with tear-off tabs by copying all of that information vertically several times at the bottom, then cutting slips in the spaces between. This may help you determine interest in certain areas of campus, and combat vandalism. If there are tear-off tabs, removal of the whole flyer is less likely to be due to a student taking it with them to have the information later. Ready-made flyers are available on our **Design Exchange**.

Chalking

Chalking is great for early fall semester outreach, as well as for groups in dry climates year-round. Chalk is an item you can request from our Tabling Supplies, but is also very cheap to get in bulk locally. With chalk, you can make large, bold, creative, and artistic advertisements for your group all around campus, which may potentially hit students who might otherwise not see your flyers or table. We recommend dipping the chalk in water while drawing, which will draw darker and make it last longer against the elements, foot traffic, and vandalism, though it will be used up a little faster. Many will be tempted to draw right in the middle of a major pathway; however, people won't see your promo during busy times, and more shoes will rub it away

faster. Instead, notice the places just *off* those major pathways where few people walk, and draw there, whether it's an off-branching sidewalk or an almost-untouched section of concrete. This will provide better visibility and extend the drawing's life. Some campuses do not allow chalking, or restrict it to areas where rain or snow will naturally clean it off. Find out your campus's restrictions from your campus organization office so that your group doesn't get into any trouble.

Gimmicks

Gimmicks are great to do early each semester: They're usually interactive and eye-catching, getting you lots of attention and bringing in prospective members. There is no limit to what you can do (besides good sense and campus policy). Gimmicks are the ultimate expression of your group's creativity and ingenuity. Generally, the only tabling supply you need for these are business cards and brochures to hand out at the events, as there should be more emphasis on the activity than on a table. While the ideas are simple, gimmicks take a lot more planning than other types of promotion, especially if you are making something. Here's a sample of ideas that other groups have done:

Stone a Heathen

The concept behind this is to have people pay a dollar or so to throw water balloons at group members. While a fun event, it should be used to bring awareness to blasphemy laws, as well as to the human rights abuses that occur in many countries.

Send an Atheist to Church

This is another simple and fun fundraiser, where people put money in jars representing different religions and their local houses of worship, and the one that earns the most is where the group will attend a service. If you promote well to local and campus religious groups, you can get a better turnout and earn more funds for your group. They work especially well if a portion of the funds is used to benefit another local cause, like a food pantry, women's shelter, or animal rescue.

Street Preacher Bingo

Many campuses receive visits from vitriolic preachers, anti-choice groups, or other groups representing views we find harmful or offensive. While they are often allowed on campus, you don't have to let them be there without pushback. In Street Preacher Bingo your group distributes bingo sheets with squares representing various harmful or offensive opinions a speaker is likely to espouse to crowds of dissenters at an event, drawing their attention by encouraging them to mark off squares when the speaker mentions the topics until they reach bingo! Each sheet you pass out should also have your group information on it, so once someone

is done playing the game, they have an easy way of contacting your group. You can order bingo sheets and counter-protest signs in an SSA Counter-Protest Packet.

Large Displays

Some of the best gimmicks are displays made out of nothing other than cardboard and paint. Here are some quick ideas other SSA groups have used:

- **Out of the Closet Photobooth:** Making a “closet” people can take pictures of themselves coming out of in solidarity with LGBTQ+ people.
- **Ascent of Man:** A life-size display of the well-known ape-to-human progression image, leaving the human space empty for people to fill and take pictures with.
- **Free Speech Wall:** Using cardboard, whiteboards, or large sheets of paper, allow people to write whatever they want. Yes, anything. Your group can display them somewhere at the end of the day.
- **Flying Spaghetti Monster:** This display can be made with pool noodles and stability balls. Great for tabling photo ops, or some have made it into a mascot suit!
- **Secular Solstice:** Given many governments’ promotion of the Christian form of celebration in December, it can be nice to mix it up a little for diversity. A display celebrating winter solstice can be a great addition.

Protests

You may want to bring awareness to a local, national, or global problem. You may also be counter-protesting a speaker or group that has shown up on campus. Whatever the cause, protests are a great tool historically utilized by students around the world to air their grievances or take a stand. Most importantly, make sure you are promoting an action item to follow through on, such as delivering a petition or attending a council meeting, so that the event is not just hollow picketing.

Email

Email is still the best mass-communication tool currently available, although some people haven’t quite mastered using it effectively. Always keep member signup lists on your table to maintain the correct contact information for sharing events, meetings, announcements, and other updates with all your members.

Use BCC

If you are not utilizing an email list service, you must use the BCC (literally “blind carbon copy”) field to hide your recipients’ email addresses before sending an email to the entire group. Otherwise, everyone who receives it will be able to see all recipients’ email addresses, a huge breach of privacy for members and a violation of trust. Using BCC also keeps people from receiving countless email responses by making it impossible for any recipient to respond to it using “reply all.” Never, ever forget to use BCC when sending email to large groups of people. For small groups, like special committees or your core leadership, you can use CC (“carbon copy”) for group responses.

Have an Intriguing Subject Line

Clickbait works. It is not a new phenomenon: even in the days before radio, newspapers came up with catchy titles to get people to buy the paper and read the story. If your email’s subject line is boring, such as “Meeting On Tuesday,” many people won’t open it to read the valuable info inside. A helpful exercise to find the best subject line is to come up with ten of them, which really encourages your brain to work, and will help you figure out if your first instinct was actually the best. Some email list services provide something known as A/B testing, where you can send the same email in versions with different subject lines to a small portion of members, then send the better-performing one to your entire mailing list later. This simple tool can greatly increase the number of people who actually read your email, especially among people who signed up for your list but haven’t shown up to an event. People tend to read only the section of an email that is referenced in the subject line, because that’s what interested them in clicking through to it, so make sure the most important content you want people to read is expressed in the subject line and in the very beginning of your message.

Short, Sweet, and to the Point

No one will read a giant wall of text, so keep your content to a minimum. Bold the most important details so that when people inevitably start skimming, they’ll get the essential message of the email. Space out content for even easier reading, and just use 1-2 sentences per point. Again, people will mostly only read the content promised in the subject line, so make sure the most important information is conveyed first.

Use a Template

If you are communicating with members of your email list through a personal account, like Gmail or Yahoo, this will not apply. However, with a list service, you can create standard templates and use formatting to create emails that are easy to follow and nice to look at. Having a template can add a level of professionalism to your emails that you probably won’t

have in a BCC'd email. They'll also format better on both desktop and mobile devices, which is especially great for pictures.

Social Media

Because social media is an increasingly widespread and essential part of how we interact with the world, maintaining a strong social media presence is essential to your group's survival. Even if you are tabling and flyering, if someone finds you through an internet search and doesn't see any recent posts on your website, they will think your group is dead. This is why it's important not just to have a social media platform, but to figure out what will be best for you to keep updated. The primary postings, of course, should be group announcements, event invitations, and reminders. However, when you don't have anything group-specific to post, and nothing has been updated for a few days, we encourage you to sprinkle in articles or engaging questions. There are many secular bloggers, and plenty of news relating to our secular values, which you can pull from. Polls or open-ended questions are also great for getting members participating in the group, and may help you figure out what future meetings to have.

One thing to remember is never to rely on promoting your events solely on social media. Even if you get a high number of RSVPs or interested people, the rule of thumb is to only plan on half of those showing up. You must still do most of your promoting using traditional campus-based outreach. Think of social media as a way to update people quickly about changes, and especially to remind them closer to the event that it's happening. Social media reaches your existing membership base, but rarely draws others from outside. In-person promotion can help fill this communication gap.

Again, we most strongly recommend using a Facebook Group, as it encourages members to interact, allows more privacy for members, and enables members to be notified of administrator posts.

Always have public contact information on your web presence as well, at the very least a Facebook page or email address through which a visitor can send a message to your group. Media, prospective members, or others interested in your group may find you this way.

Intersectional Outreach

A great way to grow attendance at your events is to reach out to like-minded organizations, both on and off campus. Many of our secular values also intersect with progressive and social justice causes, such as environmentalism, feminism, racial equality, and so on. This means that groups focusing on those causes are natural allies for many SSA events, and many members of those groups may also want to join your group as well. Reach out as a leader to the group, ideally by showing up to one of their meetings and introducing yourself to their leader, and mention that

you are interested in collaborating. This can be hosting a joint event, inviting their leader to speak to your group, or encouraging your members to attend their events, and seeing if they will do the same. This can help increase attendance for both groups, and build great bridges for when your groups' interests intersect.

The same is true for religious groups, although with the addition of friendly competition. The SSA encourages not hostility towards any religious group, but cooperation and communication whenever possible. Though we may disagree on a lot of issues, ultimately by remaining open to collaboration, we may provide them the opportunity to have a better understanding and view of us, and vice versa. There can be room both for cooperative events, such as service projects or fundraising, and for more competitive events, such as joint debates or panels.

Debates do little to add to the millennia of arguments for and against the existence or primacy of any particular deity. Rather, the best function they can have is to expose audience members to information and points of view they might otherwise never encounter. That said, they can still be fun if you get a good speaker (such as those available in our Speakers Bureau) to debate the chosen religious representative, and may be a good fundraiser for the two groups if you charge admission and split the earnings evenly. Religious people usually attend these events, especially those most closely associated with the religious group co-hosting the debate, increasing both turnout and revenue.

Interfaith panels are much less work to put on, as the representative speakers can usually be found locally to represent their beliefs, and are more willing to participate because the format is based more on espousing belief than in putting forth arguments that need time and work to prepare. Panels can get particularly interesting when you have more wide-ranging questions than simply "What do you believe?", "What happens after you die?" and so on. These might be "What is a stranger?", "How should we treat animals?" or "What does your faith tell you about art?" This also lets you interact with more than one religious group, and thus expose a wider array of people to the secular worldview. You'll also be able to focus more on areas where you agree than on differences, opening up avenues of political engagement down the line.

First Meeting

First impressions are extremely important, and doubly so for your group! Your first meeting of the semester will almost always be the one with the most prospective members in attendance, and will create their impressions of what their participation in the group would be like. If they aren't impressed, they will move on to bigger and better things,, but if they are, you just might have a new group member. It's important to note as well that attendance at every first meeting will be more plentiful if you promise free food (usually pizza!).

You should have a plan for your first meeting well before you start your promotion around campus. The leader of the meeting should know how to explain what is planned and how to put on icebreaker activities, and should take the time to practice presenting such activities, and should build the confidence to answer any questions participants have. You also need to bear in mind the time it takes to get funds for food and the requirements for reserving space. You can get that information from your campus organization office. Your first meeting should also be heavily promoted at your campus activity fairs at the beginning of each semester/quarter.

When it's finally time to have your first meeting, there are some basic items you'll want to address first, like officer introductions, short-term and long-term plans for the group, and your own story. Telling the group about yourself and your motivations for leading the group will go a long way towards humanizing yourself to your prospective membership. This is more than a speech about your view of religion: It should be a story, *your* story. Why do you care about having an SSA? What got you to this point in your life? What kind of person are you? What do you want to get out of this group and what do you hope it will become? Opening yourself up shows that you are approachable, and have a lot in common with your audience. It will also give them a chance to consider these questions for themselves, and start creating a narrative in their mind about why they're here and what they want to do as well. That said, keep your story brief, no more than five minutes, or the focus of the meeting will shift to you instead of to your new members.

That's where icebreakers come in. These are short games designed to bring out information about the people playing it. Lots of bad icebreakers revolve around names, which don't tell you anything about the person and are hard to remember anyway. A good icebreaker will get the players to interact so that they start to form bonds with each other (and, therefore, with the group!).

You can find a comprehensive list of icebreakers in our **First Meeting Activity packet**.

Planning for the Future

You'll want to have an idea of what your group will be doing in the future, to talk about both at tabling and at your first meeting. We've referenced many already, but there are several national efforts and proven activities for you to specifically think on.

SSA Events

The SSA coordinates a few special national events, nearly all of which were originally conceived by student groups like yours! Now, each is put on by dozens of groups around the country, meaning that as you join them, you know you are participating in a national endeavor. We offer special tabling supplies, materials, and/or funding for each whenever they come around, making running each as easy and cost-effective for you as possible.

SSA Con

The Secular Student Alliance Annual Conference (SSA Con) is an event put on by the SSA National office each summer, often in Columbus, Ohio. It specializes in development of leadership and grassroots organizing skills, and in secular activism training. It is not intended to "preach to the choir" about the value of the secular worldview, but to impart practical knowledge to new and experienced leaders to take back to their groups, often from other students talking from their own experiences. Throughout the weekend, students have the opportunity to network, exchange ideas and best practices, and form lasting relationships with other student activists, SSA staff, and movement leaders from across the US! It is also intended to be as affordable to students as possible, keeping the cost of registration low, utilizing campus dorm rooms for lodging, including meals with registration, and offering Leadership Travel Aid to help groups cover the expenses of getting to the Con. We announce it pretty early in the year so that you can mark it on your calendar and work on planning your trip with your group!

Graveyard of the Gods

Graveyard of the Gods is an October event to highlight the dead gods that have come and gone throughout history. Students put this on by creating and decorating headstones for dozens of gods, and displaying them on the quad or grassy areas on campus for other students to browse through. Some groups have also started putting on Graveyard of Great Minds to highlight influential scientists, activists, or leaders that have passed on, especially those whose work has been forgotten or deemphasized by history. A benefit of putting on Great Minds is it can be run in collaboration with intersectional and religious groups: They can choose influential figures from their perspectives that you may not have considered.

Secular Solstice

Secular Solstice is a December event to help create ritual for secular students during a time that they may find unwelcoming. For a long time, the value of ritual has been lost on many secular people, mainly because we see it as something strictly in the realm of religion. We often focus so much on rational thought that we forget about the emotional part of our brain, the part that connects us to each other and to the world. A ritual is an action, activity, or ceremony repeated with regularity that has specific meaning or significance and reinforces a desired outcome, and it need not be religious in nature. There's a lot of value in participating in such rituals regularly with your group to help create meaning, bonding, and fulfillment among members.

Darwin Day

Darwin Day is every February 12th. Even if you cannot hold an event on the exact day, you can hold an event at another time during the week. Darwin Day is a fantastic opportunity for your group to take part in a national celebration of education and science. Groups around the country, and around the world, will be celebrating the birth of one of the most important scientists of the modern era. It's not only a way to educate your own group members on the importance of evolution and Darwin's work, but also an opportunity to reach out to your wider campus and community to foster a better understanding of the theory of evolution and its place in modern biology.

Ask an Atheist Day

National Ask An Atheist Day is an opportunity for secular groups across the country to work together to defeat stereotypes about atheism and encourage courteous dialogue between believers and nonbelievers. The event is intended to be an opportunity for the general public—particularly people of faith—to approach nontheists and ask questions about secular life. We're encouraging all SSA Affiliate groups to participate at whatever level they are able! This day occurs every year on the third Thursday of April. However, your group is also encouraged to hold Ask an Atheist events whenever you are able to,.

Group Activities

You've got to keep things going in between SSA events! If all you do is have discussion meetings, your group will get very boring for members, so mix things up with a diverse array of activities.

Speaker Events

Bringing a speaker to your regular meetings, or creating a special event for them, can be incredibly educational and rewarding for your group. While our Speakers Bureau has an outstanding selection of speakers, you may also consider inviting local speakers or leaders of other campus groups. Speakers are great for panels, debates, SSA events, fundraisers, or other campus-wide events. They can talk on specialized topics with a greater level of expertise and finesse than a non-expert member of your group could. Again, if you select someone from the SSA Speakers Bureau, you can request Speakers Bureau Funding, which can cover some of the costs of travel and lodging to bring the speaker to your campus.

C.A.S.E.

C.A.S.E. stands for Community, Advocacy, Service, and Education. These are the four major areas that SSA Affiliates generally engage with when planning their events. You should ensure that your group is touching on all of these areas throughout each semester to satisfy the various expectations different members will have. Some may only want new friends, while others want to change the world. If your events only focus on one of these areas, you might alienate members who are not seeing their interests or goals and hopes for the group addressed, and they might withdraw from participation in the group, shrinking your overall membership.

Community

One of the most important purposes of an SSA Affiliate group is to be a safe space for nontheists. The broader community is not always welcoming to nontheists, and the process of “coming out” can be very difficult, especially if families, romantic partners, or close friends are very religious. Therefore, it’s important to us that nontheists—and theists with doubts—have a community where they can feel safe and free from judgment, and know they can express their doubts and ask questions. While this part of the focus area is internal, there is also an external aspect: engaging with the larger community. This is done through cooperating with other organizations, participating in interfaith programs, getting involved in student government, and so on. It may even take place on a larger scale, including cooperation with nearby SSA Affiliate groups or the national secular movement.

Advocacy

Students are famous for being great advocates, and this is where SSA Affiliates really shine. Groups can participate in all sorts of advocacy activities, including letter-writing campaigns, rallies, demonstrations, protests, tabling events, and others.

Service

Part of being a secular person is understanding that this life is the only life we have, and that this Earth has to last us for as long as we live. Engaging in volunteer activities kills three birds with one stone: first and foremost, it makes the world a better place; secondly, it helps eliminate stigma against nontheists by letting people to see us as contributing, caring citizens of the world; and thirdly, it engages student groups in a regular series of activities that are fun and provide an opportunity for members to become friends in a way that a classroom setting doesn't always provide. The internal aspect of service includes things like helping one's affiliate group plan events, flyering for the group, providing transportation to other students, and so on.

Education

SSA Affiliates focus a great deal on educating both their membership AND their communities about our world, correcting misinformation about secular worldviews, and discussing issues that affect secular people. They do this by hosting guest speakers and conferences, tabling, hosting debates and cooperative events with other groups, conducting outreach activities and awareness campaigns, and more.

Conclusion

This is a lot of information, but something to bear in mind is that it gets easier as you get going. You can always count on your SSA Campus Organizer to help you navigate any problems you have. If you've forgotten who your Campus Organizer is, you can email organizer@secularstudents.org and your question will be forwarded to them to respond to you. As we also mentioned, attending SSA Con during the summer serves as a crash course for new leaders by giving them access to the knowledge and experience of veterans. We cannot recommend strongly enough to start planning to attend it in July.

This Week Emails

The This Week email for student leaders is how we regularly communicate with you about the services and resources the SSA has to offer you, while also highlighting student stories. It will remind you of when large events are coming up, when to order supplies, and notify you of opportunities available to you and your group through both us and other secular organizations. Reading these short emails and the resources they link to will help you grow as a leader throughout the year.

Brag it Up

Of course, we want to hear from you too! Our Brag It Up form is the best way for you to tell us about your accomplishments, and send us photos of your events so that we can tell other student leaders and donors about what you're doing. We hope to see how awesome your group becomes!