Creating and Sustaining a Student Voice Council

The purpose of a student voice council (SVC) is to amplify the voices of incarcerated students, ensuring their perspectives shape the educational programs and correctional policies that directly impact them. Rooted in the belief that equitable student representation improves educational and correctional outcomes, SVCs foster collaboration between students, department of corrections (DOC) staff, and higher education administrators. This approach helps bridge communication gaps and ensures that programs align more closely with student needs as well as institutional goals. By elevating student voices, SVCs promote a culture of inclusion and collaboration in correctional education.

The structure of an SVC can vary depending on the unique needs and circumstances of a facility. Some groups may decide to organize by having representatives from each type of program available within the facility. Others might adopt a structure based on roles or chair positions, such as president or vice president, or specific committee leads for areas like events, student engagement, advocacy, and so on. The flexibility in structure is intentional. By allowing the format to be tailored to the facility's context, councils are better positioned to reflect the diverse experiences and needs of students. When designing an SVC structure, it is important to consider factors like the size of the facility, the range of programs offered, and the dynamics of the student population. This helps ensure that the council can remain representative and effective in fostering student engagement and contributing to program improvements.

This checklist was developed based on lessons learned from the Vera Institute of Justice's (Vera) Beyond Access report[1] and Vera's related experience supporting SVCs in correctional education programs. It serves as a practical tool for students, DOC administrators, and higher education partners to navigate the process of building and sustaining effective councils. The checklist

Developed by
Eurielle Kiki
Kayla James

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offers guidance for stakeholders as they work to create spaces where student voices are both heard and valued. By addressing questions to consider, identifying common challenges, and offering actionable steps and tasks, this resource helps support SVCs in fulfilling their mission.

The checklist is structured around Bruce Tuckman's Group Development Model.[2] This framework describes how groups evolve toward high performance and functionality. According to this model, groups move through five key stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These stages are nonlinear, meaning groups may move back and forth between stages or occupy more than one at the same time. To support this process, the checklist includes worksheets designed to help organizers track objectives and reflect on critical questions for each stage. Vera recommends that all stakeholders, including new council members, read through these phases of group formation in order to anticipate and prepare for changes in group dynamics. By using this tool, stakeholders can create environments that empower students to share their insights and influence policies that can produce meaningful results for equality and success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Worksheet A: Forming

The forming phase represents a crucial beginning for any group. Collaboration is necessary from the start in the creation of an SVC. This worksheet encourages higher education program (HEP) leaders and DOC administrators to work together during the initial stage to establish eligibility criteria, recruitment strategies, and a selection process for the first SVC members. This phase involves key tasks such as conducting outreach and planning the orientation for members. While HEP leaders may take the lead in facilitating the council's initial formation, it is important that many structural decisions, such as defining roles, setting goals, and establishing meeting protocols, are determined collaboratively with the inaugural members. This shared approach fosters buy-in and reinforces the student-centered nature of the SVC.

OBJECTIVES

1. Get buy-in from DOC and college leadership.

2. Identify the college or DOC staff that will guide the council.

3. Launch initial group.

4. Establish initial group rapport and foster familiarity among members.

5. Manage and organize council meeting spaces.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

For HEP Leaders

Support from DOC and HEP

- How can approval for this initiative be secured?

- Who are the main stakeholders who need to be involved in this conversation?

- What concerns or hesitations might DOC and college leadership have about an SVC?

- What priorities do leadership teams have that the SVC could help support?

- How will DOC staff be educated about the SVC role?

- How will DOC staff be involved in the support of the SVC?

- What meeting spaces are available for the council to utilize?

- Who will ensure council members have authorized movement to congregate for meetings?

- Who will keep key staff at the facility informed and engaged in this process?

- Can any relevant materials be donated in advance?

- What resources (e.g., financial, materials, space) will the SVC need to function effectively?

Purpose, structure, and goal setting

- What are the primary goals of the SVC?

- What decisions will the SVC have the authority to make?

- Who are the key stakeholders to engage with in both the educational and correctional settings?

- What topic areas will the SVC be discussing? What topic areas are outside of the scope of an SVC?

- Will the SVC be involved in hosting college-related events (e.g., book or job fairs) or assist with the planning of events (e.g., recruitment, orientation, graduation)? How?

Membership and rapport-building

- How will the SVC structure align with existing educational programs (e.g., the SVC will be made up of students from one HEP; the SVC will be facility-based and include students from several HEPs at the facility; the SVC will be statewide and include representatives from all HEPs) or otherwise?

- What criteria will determine who can participate in the SVC (e.g., GPA, enrollment status, program tenure)?

- How many members will the SVC initially have?

Meetings and student engagement

- Where will the SVC meet? When will it meet?

- How will the meetings be scheduled to avoid conflict with classes and facility operations?

- What initial training and ongoing support will be provided to SVC members?

For SVC

Purpose, structure, and goal setting

- How will decisions be made? (e.g., majority rules, plurality, unanimity, or consensus)

- What is the council structure? (e.g., traditional board structure, flat structure)

- What values does the SVC want to promote?

- What roles will each member take on initially?

Membership and rapport-building

- What criteria will determine who can participate in the SVC (e.g., GPA, enrollment status, program tenure)?

- How will SVC members be selected or elected?

- How many members will the SVC have, and what roles will they fulfill?

- How long can students serve on the SVC?

- What will the SVC's leadership structure (if any) look like?

- What initial icebreaker activities can help members get to know each other?

- How will SVC members establish trust among council members?

- How will new members be onboarded after the SVC launches?

Meetings and student engagement

- How often will the SVC meet?

- How will records of meetings and decisions be kept? Who will keep them? Where will they be kept?

- How will the SVC communicate with the broader student population?

SUGGESTED TASKS

For DOC and HEP

Appoint an SVC adviser at the program or facility level to help support the formation of the SVC and serve as a resource for students.

Designate a liaison between the SVC and DOC staff to address concern and facilitate ongoing cooperation between the council and the correctional facility.

Develop a mission statement and a set of SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) goals that guide the council's activities and provide a basis for evaluation.

Create a stakeholder list that identifies key partners in both the educational and correctional systems, including administrators, educators, and facility staff.

Organize an introductory meeting to present the SVC's purpose to these stakeholders, seeking feedback and potential areas for collaboration and support.

Define clear eligibility criteria for participation and aim for a representative group of students to serve on the council, considering factors such as age, race and ethnicity, time incarcerated, time to release, time in the education program, educational background, etc.

Develop an application or nomination process to ensure that a diverse range of students who meet the criteria have an opportunity to participate.

Monitor representation and adjust recruitment efforts as needed to maintain a balanced and diverse membership.

Host introductory sessions to discuss the role of the SVC, providing an open forum for interested individuals to ask questions and apply or express interest in joining.

Create informational materials that outline the purpose, goals, and benefits of joining the SVC.

Consider designing a training curriculum that includes modules on leadership, communication, and conflict resolution tailored to the unique environment and needs of the council.

Create opportunities for engaging DOC staff to ensure their understanding of the SVC's goals and to gain their support in facilitating meetings and activities.

For SVC

Develop a clear protocol for how decisions will be made within the SVC (e.g., majority rules, consensus, unanimity).

Create a framework for the council's structure. Outline roles for each member, including leadership positions and responsibilities.

Establish clear eligibility requirements for membership. Decide on a process for selecting members, whether through elections, nominations, or an application process.

Define terms of service and leadership structure.

Establish a meeting schedule and standardize meeting documentation.

Store all meeting records in an accessible, secure location.

Develop a communication plan that includes methods like bulletin boards, newsletters, or group meetings to keep the larger student body informed and engaged.

Consider ways to receive suggestions from prospective students on ways to improve postsecondary education in prison.

Implement regular feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys, suggestion boxes) to allow students to voice their needs and concerns to the SVC.

Establish a process for reviewing student feedback, reporting findings, and developing action plans in response.

CONCLUSION

In this phase, stakeholders will have established the foundation for a successful SVC. By fostering the necessary collaboration between DOC administrators, HEP leaders, and inaugural council members, this phase sets the tone for a student-centered initiative that reflects shared goals and responsibilities. With key tasks completed—such as gaining institutional buy-in by presenting the initiative to key stakeholders in the college and DOC, securing approval to develop a council, identifying staff support, recruiting members, and fostering initial rapport—the groundwork is laid for a well-structured and purpose-driven council.

Several challenges may have emerged during this stage, such as limited resources or difficulty securing stakeholder buy-in. In these instances, it is important to revisit the council's mission and emphasize the long-term benefits of having an SVC. These could include improved student outcomes, enhanced communication, identification of gaps in programming, or other items. It will be important to continuously be flexible within this process. By proactively addressing challenges as they arise and prioritizing students' needs, HEPs and corrections agencies can set the inaugural SVC on a path toward success.

Worksheet B: Storming

The storming phase is a critical stage in team development where members navigate conflict, power dynamics, and individual differences on the road toward cohesion. This worksheet aims to guide councils through common challenges of this phase by adopting strategies that foster open communication, trust building, and accountability. Through reflective questions and suggested tasks, participants will explore strategies for navigating conflict resolution, confidentiality, and effective collaboration with DOC and HEPs. Additionally, the worksheet encourages participants to critically examine and manage power imbalances within the SVC and in interactions with external leadership. This includes developing the trust needed to question council members and the confidence to suggest ideas to leadership that can lead to better outcomes for students. By encouraging an environment where unproductive leadership can be challenged constructively, a council can foster a more balanced dynamic.

OBJECTIVES

1. Encourage members to communicate openly and authentically.

2. Recognize that members may still identify more as individuals than as part of a team and continue to foster team building.

3. Address and manage any movement toward group control.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Conflict resolution and group decision-making

- What processes will the SVC put in place to handle conflicts and foster accountability?

- How will the SVC address power sharing and group decision-making?

- What strategies will the SVC employ to ensure all voices are heard?

- What strategies will the SVC use to facilitate open discussions and address differing viewpoints?

- How will the SVC handle challenging or negative student feedback?

- How will power imbalances between students and staff be addressed?

- What conflict resolution tactics will the SVC use?

Confidentiality

- What measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality of SVC discussions?

- What protocols will be in place to address any breaches of confidentiality?

- Will members have access to anonymous reporting mechanisms for concerns related to confidentiality?

Collaboration with DOC and HEPs

- How will the SVC work with DOC and college administrators to promote change in postsecondary education?

- What is the process for SVC members to express concerns to DOC and college administrators?

SUGGESTED TASKS

For DOC and HEP

Consider coordinating training for SVC members on active listening, conflict resolution and restorative practices, giving and receiving constructive feedback, effective communication, and collaborative decision-making.

Establish regular meetings with key administrators to share SVC insights, concerns, and proposed changes.

For SVC

Establish ground rules for equitable participation, such as community agreements, structured turn-taking, respectful debate, active listening, empathy, rotating speaking roles, and anonymous feedback opportunities to ensure all members' ideas and perspectives are respected.

Create a clear process for handling conflicts within the SVC, including steps for addressing disagreements and promoting accountability.

Ensure the decision-making process for the SVC promotes fairness and respect for all members' input.

Develop a protocol for addressing challenging or negative student feedback, ensuring that responses are constructive and solution-oriented.

Identify and address power imbalances between students and staff through transparency and open dialogue.

Create clear guidelines to protect the confidentiality of SVC discussions, ensuring that sensitive information shared during meetings remains private.

Define the steps to be taken if a breach of confidentiality

occurs and determine consequences for violating confidentiality agreements.

Provide members with an anonymous channel to report confidentiality concerns or other issues within the council to the DOC and/or college.

CONCLUSION

In this phase, the SVC will have navigated critical challenges of working as a team. Conflicts, power differences, and individual differences will likely have begun to arise. It is important to approach these with intentionality. Members will need to confront these issues head-on and begin to establish open communication and accountability with each other. Establishing clear ground rules can help maintain equitable participation and respect among members. Similarly, having a well-defined process for conflict resolution reinforces a culture of fairness. Additionally, addressing confidentiality proactively by having clear protocols, consequences for breaches, and anonymous reporting channels will allow the council to continue to have accountability as it grows as a unit. Friction is bound to occur, but this friction has the opportunity to be turned into growth. This will help ensure the council can become a collaborative body. While this stage can be particularly difficult, it is vital for cultivating resilience.

Worksheet C: Norming

The norming phase represents a turning point where team members begin to work cohesively and start to embrace collaboration and shared purpose. This worksheet is designed to support SVCs as they establish unity and build trust among members. Participants will explore strategies for retaining engagement and fostering leadership development. By also engaging SVC alumni, councils can strengthen their foundation for long-term success.

OBJECTIVES

1. Foster a sense of team unity and collaboration among members.

2. Build trust through consistent follow-through on assigned tasks.

3. Establish strategies to retain active participation and encourage alumni involvement.

4. Provide relevant leadership training and development opportunities for current and future SVC members.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What long-term goals does the SVC aim to achieve?

- How is the SVC engaging alumni members?

- What strategies will the SVC use to retain members and keep them engaged?

- Can former SVC members or external mentors be involved in guiding current members?

- How will the SVC continue to address and respect the cultural backgrounds of its members?

- What leadership development opportunities can members participate in beyond the SVC?

- How can the SVC engage alumni or community-based organizations for post-release support?

- Will there be an annual review of the SVC's activities and effectiveness?

SUGGESTED TASKS

For DOC and HEP

Schedule annual progress meetings between SVC, DOC, and college administrators to review council growth and collaboratively address student-driven proposals for institutional improvements.

Define a clear framework for how DOC and college administrators will approve SVC activities and consider program recommendations.

Collaborate with SVC and SVC alumni in discussions on postsecondary education improvements.

For SVC

Introduce regular team-building activities and collaborative projects.

Offer regular opportunities for members to take on new responsibilities or leadership roles.

Establish an alumni network of former SVC members who can serve as advisers or mentors to current members.

Schedule events where alumni can share insights and provide guidance on leadership and advocacy within the SVC and beyond.

Create a succession plan for leadership roles, identifying potential future leaders and providing them with training and mentoring opportunities to ensure continuity.

CONCLUSION

In this phase, the SVC will ideally have transitioned into a more cohesive and collaborative unit, driven by a shared sense of purpose and commitment to the council's mission. Members will feel a stronger connection to one another as they actively contribute to the council's activities and trust each other to follow through on tasks. The inclusion of alumni and leadership development can also further solidify the council's foundation and help ensure its sustainability. Maintaining this engagement and unity will require continuous effort. As challenges arise, such as declining participation or difficulties with retention, the council will need to leverage strategies to boost morale and ensure every member has a meaningful opportunity to contribute. Establishing alumni networks could support momentum as former members can provide insights and mentorship. Collaboration with the DOC and college administrations will continue to play a significant role. Regular progress checks and processes for formally approving or rejecting SVC initiatives can help align efforts while still ensuring student-led proposals are taken seriously. This phase is vital for strengthening internal dynamics, as well as for legitimizing the SVC as a body that can support change in postsecondary education in prison.

Worksheet D: Performing

The performing phase represents the culmination of team development, where the SVC operates at its highest level of efficiency and impact. This worksheet provides guidance on evaluating outcomes, sustaining operations, and strengthening partnerships with administrators to ensure continued progress. Members will explore methods to measure impact and document practices for future success. The SVC will continue to navigate challenges while maintaining momentum. This worksheet equips members and administrators with strategies to sustain collaboration and ensure accountability.

OBJECTIVES

1. Review the outcomes of SVC initiatives and activities.

2. Ensure administrators actively support and collaborate with the SVC to achieve shared goals.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Measuring impact

- How will the impact of the SVC be evaluated?

- What feedback tools will be used to assess the effectiveness of SVC initiatives?

- Will there be a process to review the alignment of administrator actions with SVC goals?

- How will students outside the SVC be informed about its impact?

Sustainability

- What plans are in place to ensure the long-term sustainability of the SVC?

- How will administrators ensure consistent funding and resources to support the SVC's operations?

- What strategies will administrators use to institutionalize the SVC's role in policy and program planning?

- How will the SVC document its practices to ensure future councils can learn from its experiences?

- What happens to the SVC if key members are abruptly released or transferred to another facility?

- How will the SVC maintain its activities during disruptions, such as movement restrictions, lockdowns, or public health emergencies?

SUGGESTED TASKS

For DOC and HEP

Explore opportunities for cross-facility collaboration.

Conduct regular reviews of administrator responses to SVC recommendations, documenting outcomes and identifying areas for improvement.

Develop a framework requiring DOC and college administrators to formally approve or reject SVC proposals with detailed feedback.

For SVC

Conduct annual surveys of HEP students that gather data on the SVC's impact and identify areas for improvement.

Define success metrics based on factors such as member engagement, student participation in initiatives, feedback quality, and the tangible impact of initiatives on the student body.

Track and publicly display progress on administrator-supported initiatives to highlight successes and build trust.

Create a comprehensive knowledge-sharing document or manual that outlines key activities, decision-making processes, and important contacts for future councils.

Establish a system for notifying administrators and the council of any significant member transitions and recruit new members promptly to maintain continuity.

Pair new members with experienced council members for mentorship to help them integrate quickly and contribute meaningfully to the council's work.

Develop contingency plans that include adaptable project timelines and strategies for continuing communication and activities.

Ensure flexibility in the council's initiatives so that they can be adjusted or scaled back as needed during crises.

CONCLUSION

The performing phase signifies the pinnacle of team functionality, where the SVC operates with cohesion, purpose, and measurable impact. At this stage, the council focuses on evaluating its initiatives and solidifying relationships with relevant stakeholders. This will require thoughtful strategies for assessing the effectiveness of activities, as well as proactively encouraging ongoing collaboration with administrators. By creating systems for tracking progress and communicating results, the SVC can reinforce its role as a key driver of change.

Challenges are likely to arise during this phase, such as difficulty measuring impact or navigating disruptions like member transitions or institutional restrictions. The SVC should leverage tools like surveys or evaluations to gather actionable feedback. Developing comprehensive materials that can onboard new members can also help in quickly integrating these members into the council's work. Additionally, pairing new members with experienced members can provide continuity and preserve knowledge obtained throughout their process. As with all prior phases, maintaining strong relationships with DOC and college administrators is essential. When these administrators provide detailed responses to SVC proposals, they play a vital role in supporting the SVC's growth and establishing formal feedback loops. To navigate unforeseen challenges, the SVC should develop contingency plans that allow flexibility in timelines and initiatives, ensuring continued momentum even during disruptions.

Worksheet E: Adjourning

The adjourning phase marks the conclusion of a team's journey. In this stage, celebrating achievements and reflecting on lessons learned is vital. While not all groups reach this stage, as some may continue indefinitely, it is an opportunity to acknowledge individual contributions and prepare for the future. For councils planning to disband, this worksheet provides suggestions for leaving a meaningful legacy and sharing insights that future SVCs can build upon. Even for ongoing councils, transitioning members can apply similar practices to ensure continuity and growth.

OBJECTIVES

1. Celebrate individual contributions to the SVC's success.

2. Conduct a thorough assessment of SVC processes and outcomes.

3. Identify opportunities to amplify the SVC's impact through broader institutional integration.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can each member's unique contributions to the SVC be acknowledged and celebrated?

- What feedback should be gathered from administrators and the broader student population to inform future improvements?

- What lessons have the SVC's members learned during their time together?

- What platforms or forums can be used to share the SVC's successes and lessons with other councils?

- How will the SVC celebrate its achievements and milestones?

- How can successes be leveraged to gain support for future projects?

- How can SVCs from different facilities collaborate or share best practices?

SUGGESTED TASKS

For SVC

Hold a debriefing session after significant events where members discuss lessons learned, challenges faced, and successes achieved.

Compile a list of key takeaways from the council's experiences and use them to inform future strategies and decisions.

Create an "achievement board" where the SVC's accomplishments, such as successful initiatives or positive feedback, are displayed for everyone to see.

Develop a portfolio of successful initiatives and outcomes.

If an SVC disbands, leave behind a legacy project, such as a final report, resource guide, or successful initiative, that future councils can build upon.

CONCLUSION

The adjourning phase offers a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the team's journey. In this phase, councils should be celebrating their accomplishments and preparing for future endeavors. Whether the SVC is disbanding or transitioning members, recognizing individual contributions and documenting key lessons

is crucial for ensuring its impact endures. Celebratory activities can honor the efforts of all members and strengthen the sense of accomplishment. A thorough assessment of the council's processes and outcomes can provide valuable insights for both current and future initiatives. Gathering feedback from the student body, DOC, administrators, and council members offers a holistic view of the council's strengths and areas for improvement. Documenting these reflections in an organized format, such as a final report, can serve as a resource for future councils to build upon. This final work helps ensure the council's hard work continues to inform progress. For councils that plan to continue, fostering connections with other SVCs or facilities can amplify their reach and give them space to share best practices. Debriefing sessions can allow members to reflect on challenges and potentially spark new ideas as members learn from each other.

ENDNOTES

1   Allan Wachendorfer, Kayla James, Eurielle Kiki, and Niloufer Taber, *Beyond Access: Advancing Racial Equity and Inclusion in Prison Education Programs* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2024), https://www.vera.org/publications/beyond-access.

2   Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965), 384–399.