

# Early Childhood Student Groups

## Creating Opportunities for Professional Growth and Development on Campus

Dorothy Justus Sluss

One avenue for building NAEYC, developing professionalism among members, and creating community networks of early childhood educators involves the nearest college or university campus. Student groups are an untapped source of potential.

Benefits and privileges of NAEYC membership may be apparent to educators in child care settings. They tend to be less obvious to students in early childhood credentialing, associate, baccalaureate, and graduate programs. Establishing networks for linking professionals in the field and preparing teachers will strengthen not only our organization but also university programs and their child development centers.

Students can and should be *actively* involved in NAEYC. With the help of committed faculty, a student group or club can be established on campus and sponsored within an existing State Affiliate or local Affiliate Chapter.

**Dorothy Justus Sluss**, PhD, is associate professor and program coordinator of the early childhood education program at Clemson University in South Carolina. She serves on the executive board of SCAEYC as the liaison for students and is the faculty sponsor of the SCAEYC-sponsored student group at Clemson. She has worked with student organizations for more than two decades.

Photos courtesy of the author.

### Benefits of student involvement

Campus-based student organizations can benefit all students studying early childhood education, whether they are in Child Development Associate (CDA) training or graduate classes. Both NAEYC (Fromberg 1999; Hyson 2000) and the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC 1992) have recognized the value of opportunities that promote professional growth and development.

Unfortunately, some students in early childhood education clubs or groups pay their dues, go to a few meetings, and collect unread copies of *Young Children* by their beds. All levels of involvement are valuable, but this is not the optimal use of their time and energy and is a major loss for the student, the organization, and young children. Let's reconnect our campus communities and groups in a way that creates a synergistic network.

Having been involved in undergraduate and graduate student groups on four campuses, I have noticed certain characteristics commonly found in successful campus groups. These characteristics include (1) initial and continual planning with community members, (2) active involvement by all stakeholders, and (3) evaluating the overall goodness of fit between the

community and the organization. This article focuses on establishing, developing, and evaluating successful campus groups.

### Initial planning: Necessary first steps

The first step in developing an effective community network involves establishing a campus group (see "Tips for Starting an Early Childhood Student Group"). For those who have a campus group, optimize opportunities by planning programs in terms of one, three, or even five years.

For example, one student who attended meetings and went to a local conference was then invited to share her conference materials at the next group meeting. Though this student seemed to be involved at the periphery, she started taking a more active interest in the group and ran for office the next year. Students who know they'll be invited to speak next year or even next week view an organization differently.

Prior to this student's presentation, she had frequently whispered during meetings. Now, before her own presentation, she asked everyone to listen carefully. Members who realize that they will one day walk in the steps of the student teachers presenting on a panel tend to be more professional and receptive toward the speaker.

Make sure the meetings are a good use of everyone's time. Provide

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opportunities for social interaction (use ice breakers), refreshments (if the budget permits), and professional development activities to enhance student knowledge and build community networks. Establish a network for communicating with each other. A Web site and Listserv are useful tools. Involve alumni and local administrators as mentors or speakers. Invite local principals and directors to discuss issues that they consider when interviewing and hiring recent graduates. Relevant issues that involve career decisions are always interesting to the students. At one campus meeting, even elementary and secondary education majors attended a meeting about creating a professional teaching portfolio.

### The college campus as a resource

Establishing a professional presence on the campus and in the community requires time, resources, and organization. One valuable resource is a classroom that provides a developmentally appropriate learning environment for adults (Rogers & Sluss 1996).

Through fund-raisers one university furnished a designated classroom with round tables, cabinets for storing materials, a large table that seats up to 12, computer stations, chart paper, white boards, and bulletin boards. Bulletin boards are especially important, not for decorating but for announcements, recalls, position openings, and resource-and-referral information. Students who view the board prior to lectures can post replies between classes as needed.

On another campus, a designated classroom is used during the week by graduate, undergraduate, and associate classes and by CDA classes on Saturday mornings. By establishing a common resource space, everyone can readily access materials and individuals in the early education community.

The campus is an ideal setting for celebrating the Week of the Young

## Tips for Starting an Early Childhood Student Group

1. Meet with college/university faculty and/or administrators to discuss plans and goals for creating a campus group.
2. Talk with the NAEYC State Affiliate or local Affiliate Chapter about sponsorship.
3. Consult other campus groups in your area.
4. Talk to early childhood education classes about establishing an early childhood education group.
5. Schedule and advertise the first meeting.
  - Make fliers (approved by the college/university office) to announce the meeting place, date, and time. Include a contact name and telephone number.
  - Post fliers around campus.
6. Hold the first meeting.
  - Provide refreshments.
  - Discuss the benefits of NAEYC membership.
    - Distribute a list of the officers needed, and ask students to decide if they can commit to serving as an officer. Explain that those who are interested should develop a statement to present at the next meeting about why they want to serve in a particular office.
    - Establish meeting times and dates for the semester/year.
    - Use a iWhat We Know, What We Want to Know, and What We Learned (KWL) chart to identify program topics for the year.
7. Hold the next meeting.
  - Have students present their statements; then elect officers.
  - Discuss the development of a constitution and official affiliation with the student government group (governing body overseeing campus student groups).
8. Meet with the officers to develop a constitution and bylaws that meet the requirements for campus groups.
9. Meet regularly. Advertise the meetings.
10. Publicize activities on a Web site; create an electronic scrapbook and archive that other students can access. This allows the group to learn what similar groups are doing, documents activities, and provides a way for alumni to contact student members.
11. Develop a Listserv for contacting members and distributing information.

### The Benefits of Becoming Involved in National Conferences as a Student A Student's Perspective



When attending a national conference, students are able to learn from other professionals in the field through numerous sessions, conversations and activities.



Conferences also provide opportunities for students to discuss ideas with one another in professional social settings.



As a student, being able to attend conferences through SAVC brought many benefits to myself and other students. Through this experience, students were able to hear the most current research and knowledge in real time. We were also able to meet key researchers in our field which extended our understanding of their theories and philosophies.

These experiences helped me, as a student, to learn from other early childhood educators both from my college and around the world. These experiences helped to enrich my own career in early childhood by opening up new doors and windows in the field by exposing a joy for early childhood education and new knowledge which serves as my foundation in education.



These pictures were taken at the 2000 NAEYC Conference held at Atlanta, Georgia  
Aleysha Rieser, Brandy Shelton, Dorothy Sluss

Child and for hosting conferences. Bringing local early childhood educators, children, and parents to the campus on a Saturday morning for free activities utilizes campus facilities to benefit young children. In addition to the wealth of resources available for families, children enjoy walking and playing on the grass and trees as they wend their way to the gym. Parents like exploring the collection of children's books in the college library. See "Planning a Student-Led Week of the Young Child Celebration/Family Fun Day" for specific details on establishing campus celebrations.

Some NAEYC state and regional Affiliate conferences set aside one day when certain sessions are planned that are of particular interest to students. Some even highlight these sessions in their conference programs. At the end of the day, students often gather for a pizza party to discuss the sessions. This provides an opportunity for social interaction with peers who will become leaders in the profession.

### **Achieving official recognition**

Another important aspect of a club or group's development involves connecting with local, state, and regional Affiliates. Official sponsorship by the State Affiliate or an Affiliate Chapter, as well as the campus governing organization, requires the completion of paperwork. Though it may be tempting to just operate as an unofficial club, attaining official status ensures that students receive information from the state organization and can participate in Affiliate activities, including awards and scholarships. Official status on campus also allows the group to apply for student-government funds for speakers, special events, and travel expenses to conferences.

Communicating with other campus groups in the state can lead to the development of a network of state leaders. Students who interact with other groups on campus learn to become advocates for young children at an early point in their

careers. Leadership skills are also honed when early childhood education students compete with other groups for a share of available extracurricular funds.

### **Getting involved in the community**

An important function of campus early childhood education groups involves connecting students with the community. There are several ways to do this. One that is very effective is to hold an annual campus conference that places early childhood education in the forefront and invites community agencies, businesses, teachers, children, and families to attend different activities.

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Students in classes on child development or family involvement can plan and set up displays for parents. Classes that emphasize family relationships could choose to create brochures with basic information on community resources or make posters, similar to those used in science fairs, that highlight the benefits of play for young children, tips for talking to young children, healthy snacks, or steps to literacy. Let students apply their knowledge for community benefit. Additional handouts with recipes for art materials such as goop or glurch should also be available.

The student group can establish its presence at a conference in several ways. Members can sell student-designed T-shirts, tote bags, or other items. They can volunteer as guides and receive free or reduced admission to the conference if there is a fee. By wearing their specially

made T-shirts, students are easily recognizable as part of NAEYC. If a children's author or musician is scheduled, the student group may invite children from local schools and preschools and the surrounding community to attend free of charge. Students who assist in these activities gain both in terms of professionalism and experience.

### **Connecting with alumni**

Some Affiliate Chapters have been very successful in setting up alumni organizations composed of graduates from undergraduate and graduate level early childhood programs. These groups meet at least once a year, usually at a conference. If the campus student group does not sponsor a conference, alumni can plan to meet at a state or regional NAEYC Affiliate meeting. Alumni gatherings are a standard event for larger institutions at national conferences, but these can be especially powerful for smaller institutions meeting at state and regional levels. The meetings can use the format of the campus-based meetings. The agenda can include refreshments, social interaction (play/fun), and information (our graduates, for example, requested an overview of current trends in early childhood education).

Alumni organizations are valuable for several reasons. First, program funding can be improved through alumni contributions. One group pressed for a policy change that ensured that any alumni contributions were earmarked for the early childhood education program. Many graduates previously had contributed to the school, believing that they were supporting the program, only to learn that their contributions were going to the general fund.

The second benefit, meaningful intergenerational connections, is a spin-off of the first. In one university, many graduates had lost contact since their graduation. At the conference, they first shared their professional positions, then suddenly baby pictures started emerging from

## Planning a Student-Led Week of the Young Child Celebration/Family Fun Day

1. Establish a Family Fun Day committee at the beginning of the fall semester. This is critical. Committed students are a powerful force.

2. Estimate attendance. Most families bring all their children, so be sure to include activities for older as well as younger children. Make it truly a Family Fun Day.

3. Identify and reserve a place to hold the event. Plan for both fair and inclement weather. Examine the facility and activity plans to ensure that *all* children can play. Are there activities for children who have special challenges?

4. Set up a time for the event, with specific beginning and ending times. Begin to publicize the event at least two or three months ahead of time.

5. Contact all appropriate departments to ensure public safety. Find out who provides permission to use the building; who directs parking; who is in charge of facilities/tables, cleanup, and so forth. Maintaining good relations during this first year will build momentum for future years.

6. Determine the number of booths the site can safely accommodate, and decide who will set up in each space.

7. Invite the staff members of local child development centers to participate. Include them in the planning process.

8. Invite local organizations that serve the needs of young children, such as extension services, Child Find, Red Cross, firefighters, storytellers, and librarians to participate. Involve them in the initial planning meetings and throughout the entire process.

9. Involve relevant campus groups. Early childhood, human development, education, physical education, and nursing classes may offer additional credit for setting up a booth. Here are some potential activities:

- Place a mound of shredded paper in a play pool. Toddlers can experience the fun of playing in the paper.



- Make bubbles with a giant wand. Children can learn science concepts and enjoy creating bubbles.
- Set up an obstacle course. Children can develop physical and perceptual motor skills.
- Make hats. Children can express their creativity and engage in pretend play.
- Provide shaving cream, Goop hand cleanser, or glurchóa mixture of glue, water, and Borax soap (find recipes online). Children enjoy the sensory tactile experiences.



- Use eyedroppers to squirt colored water into clear gelatin. This facilitates children's fine motor skills and science knowledge.
- Fill tubs with sand, dirt, and water. Add props for children to use. Offer plenty of paper towels for cleanup.

When parents see how much fun children can have with inexpensive, reusable materials, they will realize how much children can learn through play.

10. Organize the cleanup. Make each group responsible for its own area. Appoint a committee to oversee all cleanup.

11. Schedule an after-hours meeting. Debriefing over pizza is a perfect opportunity to begin planning next year's event.

## Attending a Conference

### Getting started

1. Begin the planning process at least six months in advance. Prepare by reading the *Young Children* article "The Road Traveled to the NAEYC Annual Conference," by R. Isbell, P. Reece, and A. Lowery (March 1997), about one chapter's experience at a national conference. Hold planning meetings throughout the semester.
2. Determine the chapter's support for the trip in executive meetings with the officers and faculty sponsor. Consider the following factors:
  - How far away is the conference site? Will next year's conference be held closer to the campus?
  - How much money does the group have on hand to support travel? Can additional funds come from fundraisers and/or the student government?
  - How active is the group? Are members interested in conference participation?
3. Decide who will attend. If the executive committee considers sending officers only, the entire group should vote on this motion.

### Travel logistics

4. Make transportation and hotel arrangements. Plan to travel together by plane, bus, or car. Make hotel arrangements as soon as the conference location is announced. Four to six people can sleep in one room.
5. Decide how much of the expense the group will cover and how much individuals will pay. This will depend on how much the group has budgeted and how many members are willing to participate in fund-raising activities. Many groups pay for transportation, hotels, and registration. Some groups fund a certain portion, then individuals cover their own additional expenses. Food and extras are out-of-pocket expenses. Some groups pay only for transportation.
6. Be sure that everyone knows how much it will cost to register for the conference, dine in a large city, visit sites, or shop. Remind

everyone that they must carry back or ship everything they purchase! Big books won't fit in a small suitcase. Students often find very creative ways to take materials home, but with the new airline regulations, they may need to ship most of their purchases.

### Contact information

7. Complete family information and emergency forms prior to traveling. Make a list of everyone going to the conference and individual medical information, family contacts, hotel contact information, and phone numbers. Give a copy to the department administrative assistant, one to the student group president, and one to the faculty sponsor.
8. Discuss safety issues before leaving. Set certain times during the conference when the group will contact the faculty sponsor.

### Conference events

9. Determine which sessions everyone will attend. NAEYC conferences have newcomers' sessions, special interactive opportunities, and other events just for

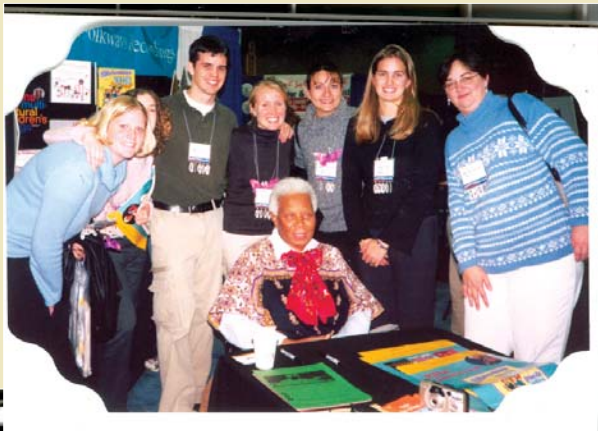
students. Help first-time conference attendees choose additional sessions. Encourage students to plan a schedule before leaving the campus.

10. Encourage everyone to sit together for the opening and closing sessions. Also plan to eat

dinner together as a group one evening.

### Upon return

11. Invite attendees to share their conference experiences at group meetings. This is students' first foray into professional development, and many find it very interesting.
12. Begin planning for the next conference!



purses and briefcases. Soon graduates of the program wanted to know about current students. Was anyone from their hometown in the class? Could they become mentors to students? The connection between a program and its graduates in the field is powerful. This creates a community of learners.

A third benefit is the establishment of a community network for public policy. Some alumni groups maintain a Listserv throughout the year. A Listserv can be especially powerful when legislative issues need action. It also connects practitioners in the field, enables the early childhood education program to conduct surveys of different classes in an efficient manner, and builds a sense of solidarity among professionals.

### National conferences

National conferences pose one of the greatest opportunities and challenges to student organizations (Isbell, Reece, & Lowery 1997). See "Attending a Conference" for tips on organizing safe trips to and from the conference for *all* students. Some students report that these conferences were the most enjoyable experiences of their college life. In a thank-you note following a conference, one student wrote, "I had never been out of the state before this trip. Thank you for taking me to my first early childhood conference." For those of us who have been in the field for 20 years or more, it is easy to forget the excitement of attending that first conference and meeting so many people who are equally interested in teaching young children.

When a group cannot afford to send all members to a national conference, some student groups send only the officers. This fosters a group's ability to maintain strong leadership. When they return, the officers report to the members on their experiences.

Other connections can be made through technology. One graduate class scheduled a conference call with the author of a text they were reading for a class after one student

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had met the author. Digital recordings and e-mail also can connect students to conferences and allow them to grow and learn.

The key is to ensure that students understand that they too are an important part of NAEYC. Through their connection to a national orga-

nization, students' voices and votes count, and they can make a difference in not just the lives of the children they touch every day but also in the lives of children all over America.

### Evaluating the effectiveness of your group

If you have a student group on campus, is it effective? What can be done to enhance its effectiveness? The activity level of a group can be rated on a scale ranging from merely organizational to highly effective (see "Evaluate Your Campus Group," p. 86, which provides a five-star rating scale). Evaluating the group or club in terms of effectiveness can provide useful information when charting the future or planning activities for the year.

Supporting and assisting a campus student group as it connects to both

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## Evaluate Your Campus Group

- \* Our group plans, publicizes, and schedules meetings on a regular basis.
- \*\* Our group plans, publicizes, and schedules meetings on a regular basis and sponsors an event during the Week of the Young Child.
- \*\*\* Our group plans, publicizes, and schedules meetings on a regular basis. We sponsor an event during the Week of the Young Child and attend or assist with local conferences.
- \*\*\*\* Our group plans, publicizes, and schedules meetings on a regular basis. We sponsor an event during the Week of the Young Child, attend or assist with local conferences, attend or sponsor officers to attend a national conference, and maintain a phone tree or Listserv.
- \*\*\*\*\* Our group plans, publicizes, and schedules meetings on a regular basis. We sponsor an event during the Week of the Young Child, attend or assist with local conferences, attend or sponsor officers to attend a national conference, maintain a phone tree or Listserv for advocacy, and support an alumni group.



the community and the professional organization requires time and energy, but the benefits are enormous. Establishing roots and networks in the community provides a cadre of support when placements are needed for field experiences, practicum settings, and student teaching. Connecting future educators with a professional organization creates a group of potential leaders. Students who have held an office during their college years may become active in NAEYC at the state and national levels.

It is rewarding to sit in an auditorium and watch students' incredulity at 1,500 cheering adults reacting when Thomas Moore, an accomplished early childhood educator and musician, walks on the stage. The crowd jumps to the floor, the students follow their lead, and everyone sings, "Humpty Dumpty, Humpty Dumpty, Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, Humpty Dumpty, Humpty Dumpty." Everyone returns to his or

her seat and students listen to Dr. Moore along with the professionals. Students aren't worried about getting a good grade. Instead they are seeking knowledge about how best to educate young children.

These experiences are powerful, and those who have experienced them will be more inclined to also pass along their enthusiasm to the next generation. Effective student groups are not just a nice addition to NAEYC; they are the heart, soul, and future of early childhood education.

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