

**Tent State University  
Organizing Model**

Third Edition

*Published on the occasion of the North East  
Students for a Democratic Society Conference of February 2007.*

[www.tentstate.com](http://www.tentstate.com)

Dear Fellow Organizer,

So, where are we going and how are we getting there?

Student apathy is a myth. If we are going to fight student alienation we must take the time now to sit down, examine the situation and channel our energies towards collective movement building.

Let's focus our thoughts on the most important goal we can accomplish together: Creating a sustainable mass student movement. Enough energy is exerted every year by radicals and revolutionaries to make this a reality. The formation of a national structure of Students for a Democratic Society provides an incredible opportunity to make sure that energy is channeled, focused, recorded, and shared. Unless we seize this possibility, our efforts will continue to be fragmented and weak.

When faced with overwhelming violence and oppression everyday, we feel a psychological need to rebel, to negate it, to insist that it must end, and to create a mass democratic revolution NOW. We won't do this in a day, or a week. If we are serious about our cause we must have the discipline, the forethought, and the courage to begin laying the groundwork for the revolution today. Through the following organizing model, we are sharing our thoughts on what has worked for us; this model explains how we have decided to try to keep our own campus movements alive.

This model is based directly on experience of Tent State organizers. Much of this model is extremely helpful and relevant in almost all universities. However, this does not mean that you have to treat the model as a set of strict rules. **Do not blindly follow this guide!** This model must be used flexibly depending on each university's environment. Only you (collectively) know what is best in your particular environment. Follow your wit, your gut, your brain, and your heart. You are about to embark on a transformative journey. Yet you are far from alone. Tent State University organizers from across the country are here for each other; supporting each other is a privilege and an honor.

Bon voyage...

Peace,  
Tent State University Organizers

## **FOUNDATIONS**

### **What is Tent State University?**

#### **Origins:**

This guide is the product of 5 years of organizing experience in the Tent State movement by a multigenerational revolutionary democratic movement that is now developing and spreading across the nation and beyond. Tent State University itself is the culmination of more than a decade of organizing by a diverse progressive movement at and around Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. Organizers of this movement learned, practiced and evolved in a myriad ways and in many different incarnations throughout the 1990's as they experimented with revolutionary democratic projects on campus and in the community at large.\*\*\* Much knowledge and experience were earned through trial and error over the years that got passed on to each new generation of organizers as the movement struggled through the typical ups and downs of grassroots activism. With the founding of Tent State University in 2003 came the living proof that a new organizing model is being developed to build a new movement capable of sustaining itself and growing from year to year, to build a movement that wages revolution by gathering people into the practice of democracy here and now.

*\*\*\* For perspectives on the student and community organizing experiments in revolutionary democracy that led up to the founding of Tent State University, check out [piratecaucus.blogspot.com](http://piratecaucus.blogspot.com).*

#### **Evolution:**

Tent State University ("Tent State") was launched as a project of the Community Empowerment Project (New Brunswick, NJ) in 2003 at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. Its initial purpose was to stop drastic state budget cuts to higher education that were pending in the wake of the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Following the activities of the local antiwar movement (in which the CEP played an active role), a coalition of over 50 student groups, faculty, and staff unions came together to support the event. For 5 days, hundreds of students built and maintained a tent city with over 40 tents on Voorhees Mall (the largest and most traveled class area on campus), symbolizing the displacement of higher education in NJ. Tent State was more than just a protest. It merged the creation of a democratic "university" system and the most significant cultural festival at RU, all built around the recognition of access to education as a fundamental element of democracy, one that is compromised by war.

Tent State University became an annual event in 2004, and continued to expand through Tent State II, Tent State III and Tent State IV. Beginning in 2005, Tent State University spread to campuses across the US (Santa Cruz, Amherst, Kansas-City, Ann Arbor, etc.). At Rutgers University, Tent State has grown into the largest continuous progressive political and cultural gathering in New Jersey, with more than 120 tents and over 1,000 participants in 2006.

### **The key elements at Tent State and Beyond:**

#### **More than just a protest:**

A critical problem with protests is that they are often viewed as the only tool to critique or solve a problem in the system. While protests function mainly to call attention to a problem, Tent State functions differently. Tent State was not conceived as a mere protest, but as an organizing model. The event itself -the

reclamation of space and gathering of students- is a starting point, not an end in itself, as is often the case in protests. During Tent State, alliances are built, actions are carried out, future are plans developed, forums are held, and retreats are planned. Students who otherwise may not have become active join because of the high visibility, easy access, and mass appeal of Tent State. The Tent State daily assemblies function as direct democracy in action. After Tent State is launched, decisions are made by all participants and planned political work is carried out. It also serves as a space for the building of community, coalitions and cultural exchange. Not only does Tent State call attention to problems, it creates a democratic structure to develop solutions to those problems, or rather, to become the solution. Instead of asking those in power to act for change, as most traditional protests do, Tent State organizers and participants ask each other how they can act together for change, regardless of what the powers-that-be say or do.

As the Tent State movement grows, the lessons learned during the Tent State University week are applied to year-round organizing through continuous experimentation with the practice of revolutionary democracy. We now believe that the melding of previous organizing experience with our own brand of democracy has created a significant contribution to the development of a new practical model for organizing a revolutionary movement in the US.

## **B. Democracy:**

Tent State participants are in charge of Tent State; this means the participants have the responsibility of creating and practicing democracy as they conceive of it. However, the practice of democracy can be a challenge since we do not have many -if any- models of true democracy in action in our world. For example, the level of alienation and disconnection associated with the US political machine prevents its citizens from learning how to live or interact with their world in a democratic manner. Thus, for many of its participants Tent State is the first experience with true democracy. Tent State challenges the notion that democracy is just the absence of repression, a mere collection of "rights" or the act of selecting representatives once a year to make your choices for you. Democracy is the process of people working together and deciding together how to build the world in which they live. Democracy must exist as the positive expression of the living world, not just as the negation of sexism, racism, homophobia, militarism, authoritarianism, and exploitation. These forms of oppressions prevent democracy from growing but only the growth of democracy can end them!

The Tent State event becomes an open space for everyone to discover democracy individually as well as collectively. Everyone at Tent State is encouraged to participate in the decision-making process and the sustainability of the operation as a whole. Building together helps students to realize that they can make decisions for themselves and that collective work is more powerful than individual work. Students collectively plan and carry out political activities, camp cleanups, security, and a variety of other responsibilities. Discussions at Tent State often focus on the potential for students to run dorms and student centers with student councils just like the general assembly at Tent State .

As students at Tent State are empowered through the creation and practice of democracy, they begin to interact with and view the world in a new way. Organizing throughout the year must include the same type of participatory democracy as the event. Students must define the movement together because we are working to build institutions that belong to everyone.

### **C. Alternative institutions:**

Tent State provides a democratic “universe-city” model. It includes classes, governing structures, culture, political action, and other activities. The specific institutions built at Tent State explore what those institutions would be like if they were directed by democracy rather than by an authoritarian administration. Such an experience provides a practical and ideological springboard for organizing at the university and beyond. The general assembly provides a micro-level model from which the exclusive politics of city and state governments can be criticized, and it creates a space for students to creatively redefine their educational process. Tent State IV further developed the Tent State community with three new institutions: Town hall, Art city, and Pueblo Latino. Town Hall provided a large, dedicated space for collaborative decision-making, making it clear that democracy stood at the heart of the community. Art City provided communal art supplies for the collaborative creation of free art that was displayed throughout the Tent State community. Pueblo Latino -designed and built by the Latino Student Council (LSC), and especially the Central American South American Alliance (CASAA)- furthered Tent State’s mission to promote diversity through democracy and self-determination.

### **D. Mass consciousness-raising:**

Tent State takes place in the heart of campus activity at the university. A highly -traversed area is ideal. At Rutgers, Tent State is built in Voorhees Mall, a large grassy park surrounded by class buildings and traveled by thousands of students during each class change. A main focus is on reaching out to not-yet-active students and offering ways for them to participate in a democratic university. With a focus on hard-hitting issues, such as connecting the destruction of higher education to corporate domination of the university and the increasing militarization of the U.S., combined with evenings of live music and other performances by all of the best local artists, Tent State quickly becomes the most happening event on campus, the place where students want to be. Since Tent State takes place continuously for an extended period of time (generally a week), the practice of democracy is combined with music, art, culture, and alternative education. The participants’ awareness of the current status of the world is raised as they begin to experience a new way of living. Such an array of high energy activity allows for sustained, deepened mass consciousness-raising that is often lacking at rallies and other traditional forms of protest.

This key element distinguishes organizing from traditional activism. Activism is merely the process of trying to accomplish a particular goal. That goal may be highly progressive and may be important for how it solves an immediate societal problem, but activism will never succeed in building a revolution. Organizing is the process of bringing the 99% of people who are being prevented from controlling their world to understand that a democratic society is in their interest. Organizing is based in promoting sustained, mass involvement to pave the way for the building of powerful, practical democratic institutions.

### **E. Power-building:**

Building Tent State requires the assertion of student power through the reclamation of resources and the collective exercise of social freedom. Often, a university administration initially refuses to allow Tent State -as the Rutgers Administration did back in 2003- so the first Tent State on any campus is often raised in opposition to the university administration’s wishes. Tent State is a Pirate Movement... (Yaarh!) Pirates take what they can and give nothing back. At the Tent State event, students reclaim the university commons for use by the democratic collective because the land belongs to the public. Any extent to which resources can

be safely absorbed by the movement and used democratically is a good thing. Thus, students come to see Tent State as a manifestation of their collective exercise of social freedom and build their own grassroots democratic institution to control their own world, not as a privilege that anyone can revoke. Tent State is a starting place to build student power in order to democratize the decision-making process and power allocation in the university; however, it does not stop at the university. Tent State allows for the development of a solid core of organizers to learn to plan large-scale, extended events and get a sense of social power. Often because of this experience, this same core of organizers will experience a sense of collective-efficacy that allows them to use their power beyond Tent State. For example, after the first Tent State at Rutgers, the same core of organizers went on to pass landmark rent control laws in New Brunswick, NJ through the use of initiative and referendum. Tent State can serve as a great springboard for progressive coalition-building, independent initiative and referendum campaigns, campaigns for student government, and independent electoral campaigns for local political office (e.g. city council) and beyond. Thus, alongside of building democratic institutions, students can build the necessary power to take over and democratize existing institutions such as student governments and city councils.

The reason for this power-building is ultimately the building of a genuinely democratic revolutionary movement. Revolutionary is a word that gets thrown around a lot, but Tent State says an act is revolutionary to the extent to which it accomplishes revolution; to the extent to which it contributes towards actually building institutions for a truly democratic society.

This may seem obvious, but lots of political activity is clearly not operating according to this principle. Many groups focus on the immediate accomplishment of political goals, and although the goals may be progressive and socially useful, if the political goal itself or the campaign style does not work to build institutions that can operate or provide a model for operating in a real democratic society then they are just reformism. Reformism accomplishes a political goal, but only limited political goals, and only with an incredible exertion of resources that cannot be sustained.

On the other end of the spectrum are groups that think that the more militant or radical an action is the more revolutionary it is. Tent State wishes to challenge the definition of militancy and radicalism. Is it truly radical to militantly protest the powers-that-be for a few hours? How much opportunity is there for people to build sustainable, collective power in a pitched battle with riot police? Sometimes militant protest is the necessary option, but oftentimes it isn't. Tent State is both radical and militant in that its participants are making the first attempts to build the new world right in the middle of the old through the use of collective social power, increasingly disregarding the authority of the powers-that-be. Tent State is an example of dual power, where the power of the system is circumvented and culture-jammed through the establishment of grassroots, democratic social power. Most importantly, Tent State becomes an organized headquarters for the broad progressive movement, providing resources and opportunities to all progressive groups and spurring the movement as a whole to expand grassroots democratic social power to other arenas beyond the campus.

People that wish to use the revolutionary movement merely as a means of self-expression are welcome to do so, but that is not organizing and will not bring about revolution. This is not meant to discourage the use of militant action, it only means it should be chosen if there is a real reason to believe it is the best way of accomplishing the goal of revolution, not because people happen to associate certain "types" of activity with revolution.

## **F. The Right to an Education:**

The founding principle of Tent State is the recognition of higher education as a fundamental right. In conceiving of education as a right, the principal function and responsibility of public universities to residents takes center stage in the discussion of budget cuts and tuition increases. As a movement, Tent State advocates that education be accessible to all regardless of their financial means, race, class, sex/gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, etc. The notion that education only be accessible to an elite class is inherently challenged by Tent State. Further, Tent State is a space to experiment with new creative forms of education that challenge the status quo. Tent State lays the foundation for a movement that works to change the balance of priorities in a nation that increasingly supports war at the expense of education and other social rights such as health care, social security, and job training.

### **BUILDING TENT STATE UNIVERSITY:**

#### **Getting started:**

First gather your core of organizers and make a realistic assessment of the amount of time and energy available to launch the Tent State. What are the local goals of your campaign?

**Suggestions:** *(An example of a campus-specific mission statement is printed at the end of this pamphlet.)*

- ? Restore state and federal funding for education to its previously highest levels.
- ? Stop tuition increases.
- ? Stop the war by highlighting the discrepancy between military/war spending and spending on higher education.
- ? What are your local concerns?

Talk about how fast you expect new people to join and help with the workload. How many other groups are you in contact with that can be approached to participate? Prepare a proposal to other groups and pitch it first to your network of activists and friends.

#### **Choosing a Location:**

Pick an area busy with class thoroughfare that has ample room. Scope out the area and plan out the basic camping infrastructure around which Tent State will naturally grow. The area has proven to be a particularly important issue. In case of police repression, it is a good idea to choose a location that many people can easily get to in very little time.

#### **Meetings:**

Throughout organizing for Tent State we suggest having three types of meetings:

*Weekly Staff Meetings-* These will consist of the core organizers to discuss the project and make plans.

*Weekly Work Team Meetings-* These teams should be a breakdown of the core organizers or staff into different teams based on your specific needs.

*Bi-weekly Public General Interest Meetings-* It is important that these meetings are well-advertised and that the foremost goal of these meetings is to bring new people into the project.

New people should be offered different levels of commitment based on their availability. Here are some options that you could give new people:

Sign up as campers, bring their friends, put up fliers in their dorms, and attend general meetings.

Also join one of the work teams and help to organize for the event

After joining one of the work teams, also attend the staff meetings and become a core organizer.

General meetings should be engaging and inclusive. They should be well moderated to avoid lengthy back-and-forth discussion between core organizers that are watched passively by the new people. They should be used to inform the group of all important tasks and encourage new people to commit to help with the work. The staff meetings are the better forum to discuss more complex policy decisions among organizers.

### **Research:**

You will need to research the issues pertaining to your campaign(s) in order to articulate the problems facing your university and the solutions you are putting forward. The campaign must be informative in addition to being righteous. For example, most students already know that tuition is expensive, that higher education is under-funded, and that the Iraq war is an illegitimate, wasteful and bloody quagmire. The Tent State team needs to articulate clearly the specific problems faced by the university/state and propose concrete solutions to address them (e.g. tuition freeze legislation, specific increases to the higher education budget, end to military recruitment on campus, etc.). All problems that are identified and solutions that are proposed must be backed up with accurate data and sources. Additionally, if time permits, the Tent State campaign should prepare one or more in-depths pamphlets on the issues or make available existing pamphlets from other sources.

### **Agitation - Framing the Event:**

Tent State staff or specific work teams should develop sharp literature to distribute across campus and/or community. A few people should also be responsible for developing sharp fliers that highlight the contradictions involved with the specific issues your campaign is addressing. Remember, the best fliers have limited amounts of text in relation to images, graphs, or other eye-catching displays of your message and key information. Use high impact imagery or pictures that are clear in meaning. Solicit feedback on fliers/posters from people who are not involved to make sure that they understand the meaning you are trying to convey.

**IMPORTANT:** Everyone involved in Tent State should flier whenever they can.

The public relations and public agitation leading up to the event must offer a clear contrast of the choices faced by students and by the country as a whole. For example, will we invest in education instead of war? The underlying message you must convey is that choosing to support/participate in Tent State will have an impact on the determination of our national priorities. Your message should convey this sense of responsibility.

Be sure that it is clear that Tent State is not just a protest that is advocating a particular stance on your main issues, but also an alternative university that holds classes, provides entertainment, and exists as a democratically-run community that is a space for organizing for change.

Further,

Develop a clear and concise statement of purpose that can be readily understood by a fifth grader.

Always advertise a meeting and give a contact point (URL, phone number) on every flier.

Always mention that new people are welcome and needed in every public piece of literature and information.

At the start of the campaign, high visibility is key! Coordinate regular fliering days to make sure that all areas of campus are covered (wallpapered!) with fliers.

### **Growing the immediate network:**

One of the most powerful qualities of Tent State is the way it unifies the broader progressive movement. This is a great need of the US Left. Through communication and interaction comes greater understanding and a more powerful overall effort. One of the major critiques of the US Left in this day and age is that each organization or group is more interested in gains for their particular cause than in gains that benefit the progressive movement as a whole. Tent State assists in movement networking so that, for example, a socialist group will work side by side with a Latino cultural student organization or a gay rights social organization. Because of this, diversity is key to a more functional Tent State.

We suggest that a team should be in charge of keeping track of the expanded network being activated by the Tent State organizers and supporters. Contact information should be compiled of all the interested participants. Talking to friends and getting them interested has proven a very affected method of getting participants. This information should be passed on to the Network Team that will store it in a simple database to keep track of the growth of the network, which will help estimate turnout. This team will also keep track of who needs to be contacted, and by whom, the week before the event to make sure that everyone is rallied to the event.

Another effective network organizing method is to contact recently signed-up friends and campers and ask them to each give the names of two of their friends that they think would want to participate. Go see the friends and tell them who sent you. This way of contacting people sets you up with an introduction. Repeat this practice so that your participants spread out like a web of personal contacts.

Send regular update emails that can be sent to the whole network to increase the momentum and keep people informed on all developments, which is especially important for those who don't come to meetings.

There should also be a welcoming team at the general meetings that records the names and contact information of all new attendees and keeps track of the membership of all work teams. Every new person that comes to a general meeting should be welcomed personally and asked for contact information. It is often useful to have an organizer stay by the door with a contact sheet and fliers to give to new people who may have to leave before the meeting is over.

Finally, organize frequent parties for the new people to get to know one another before Tent State. Parties are where colleagues become friends and build lasting connections. In addition, parties offer good fundraising opportunities and good ways to build a network of local bands and performers. Most importantly, it is often during late-night, spirited conversations that many of the most inspired ideas emerge. This is often referred to as a pirate caucus.

## **Using the Networking Power of the Net**

Don't simply wait for people to find out about your myspace.com or your facebook.com page, but actively search for people in your area to invite. When someone signs up, go to their page and send invites to all of their friends. As the buzz for your event grows, more and more people will sign up on their own. Make sure to regularly keep in touch with everyone who contacts you by sending them informative updates and offering them ways to participate even if they do not plan on attending organizing meetings. For example, encourage them to sign up their friends, make fliers available online for them to download, print and post, ask for help for research assignments, etc..

Note: Internet networking alone does not suffice to build the required momentum for an event like Tent State, however. It is essential that in addition to web-based organizing you wallpaper your campus/area on a daily basis with sharp fliers and conduct in-person organizing activities (flying, press conferences, outdoor movie showings, guerilla theater, etc.). The students, faculty, staff, and community members that you are trying to reach must experience a physical manifestation of the growing movement.

We also suggest that you refer to the national Tent State website: [www.tentstate.com](http://www.tentstate.com).

## **Coalition-Building**

Although network organizing is an excellent strategy, its weakness is its relative inability to cross community boundaries. Historically, universities are just as segregated as much of the outer-university population. Therefore, in addition to network organizing, staff organizers should actively seek out coalition partners to commit to participating in Tent State. Remember that crossing historically-established social boundaries can be difficult, but it is important to the success of any good movement. Be open and upfront with potential coalition partners. Be clear on what you are asking them to commit to and why you want them to commit. Also, emphasize that the coalition relationship is one of equality, not hierarchy. People and groups join coalitions as equal partners, not as subordinates. Finally, keep the following points in mind when building a coalition:

Your statement of purpose is a collective organizing tool. Use it to explain to groups what you stand for and what you are doing.

Incorporate all the demands of your coalition partners as opposed to forcing them to only adopt your agenda. Remember that different groups have different concerns. A campus Latino organization, for example, might be concerned with the recruitment and retention of Latino faculty, something a predominately white political group, no matter how progressive, may not even be aware of. Remember, when groups are participating equally and having their concerns integrated into the event, this is when a true coalition is formed and each group becomes just as invested into the event as the core organizers. In fact, eventually, the goal is for the coalition members to become the core organizers.

The coalition leadership should be fair and representative of the groups participating. Each group that commits to organizing for the event should have an equal amount of decision-making power. Focus on striking a good balance between promoting a progressive vision and encouraging active participation on the one hand, and welcoming the ideas and concerns of new coalition partners on the other. Be patient and allow for a creative coalition structure to emerge that best fits the organizing styles and needs of each group. Some groups may be more interested in mobilizing their own network to come to Tent State than in merging with the existing organizing activities. Even though the membership of these groups may not attend all or most of the general or staff meetings, they will be actively organizing for the

event. As the coalition grows and increasingly represents a broader section of the university and/or community you are organizing, we recommend shifting more decision-making power from the staff meetings to the coalition meetings of group representatives.

Remember that meaningful unity is not built on the basis of words or statements of purposes, but in the process of working together for a common goal. The Tent State event itself, as opposed to a rally that ends after a couple of hours, will offer the best opportunity for organizers from the most diverse backgrounds to get to know one another in the practice of democracy over the course of several days.

Organize coalition parties before Tent State. Also, do your best to encourage Tent State organizers to attend the social, cultural and political events of other groups in the coalition.

### **Logistics**

A solid logistics team must be established relatively early in the campaign, well before the actual event. This team must plan for the details of Tent State, including scheduling the events of day and night as well as the procurement of supplies (tents, banners, sound equipment, tables, chairs, food, etc.) and resources (electricity, lighting, large central public tent space, bathrooms, water, etc). These tasks are inseparable because the types of events you run determine what your needs will be. A good logistics team will have to communicate with every other campaign team to make sure all their bases are covered and the event goes off as planned.

**A. Scheduling events:** Start out with a skeleton schedule of your major events (classes and teach-ins during the day, bands and performances during the night, etc.) and then start filling in the blanks. After you know what events/classes, etc you want to have, make lists of what you need for each event. For example, if you are going to have a class indoors you need to have available space and an allotted time for the speaker/teacher and the students that attend. If it is going to take place outside, chairs, microphones, and space will probably need to be provided. Keep organized and evolving lists. As the schedule develops be sure to publicize it widely so that those who are not already planning to participate may have their interests sparked by a particular event. We recommend fliering, posting on the website, distributing in classes, etc. Also, be sure that participants at Tent State have a schedule of events beforehand. Further, make sure there is a place where people can read the schedule during the event. During Tent State, allow for spontaneous educational environments to organically form.

Once your needs are determined, split the responsibility for acquiring materials up between as many organizers as you have on your team (more on materials below). Momentum for an event like this builds continually because people constantly have ideas that they want to run with. This can be a great thing as long as the logistics team keeps this energy organized and centralized around a schedule. Your schedule is likely to run off-course at times, but as long as you open clear channels of communication with the people who are committing time and resources to your event, you will be okay.

Music and entertainment involves getting to know people. Check out local scenes - bars, clubs, school-sponsored concerts, and events that happen through other organizations, fraternities and sororities, and so on. Make sure you go to as many of them as you can. After performances, go up to one of the performers and let them know who you are and why you are interested in having them perform.

Make sure you have a brief description of Tent State ready as well as accessible contact information for you or someone else in your organization. Make sure you also get their information, if possible. Then, follow up! Even if your event is not for a month or two make sure you email or call these people within a week or so. Let them know that you enjoyed meeting them and are definitely interested in keeping in contact. See if they want to help in any way, in the time between now and the event. Putting responsibility on people that may not want to help is not cool, but letting them help when they want to help rocks!

**B. Materials:** The first task at hand is to make a list of the supplies you need to acquire for Tent State. Most universities have an operations department that is in charge of coordinating events at the school. Can you get some of your materials from your school? Research and contact companies that have supplies that you might need (tents, chairs, paper products, etc.) and let them know about your campaign (i.e. your purpose and goals) in order to cultivate a relationship and inspire them to help out. Make your list of needs public and ask staff members to contribute what they have. This is easier than it may seem at first. Collectively, we have a lot of resources that are just waiting to be organized!

**C. Food:** Get anything you can! Bagels, sandwiches, deli stuff, canned goods, have people cook meals, donate time to collaborate cooking efforts (e.g. is there a local Food not Bombs in your area?). Visit all the major restaurants in your area, especially those that cater to a college crowd. Ask these restaurants and delis if they would be willing to donate food and/or extra materials. Organizing food, like music, involves getting to know people.

**D. T-Shirts:** Make Tent State t-shirts and sell them at pre- Tent State events and parties as well as during Tent State itself. Incorporate the Tent State logo on your shirts and include a slogan or other catchy information. The logo has proved to be very popular and the t-shirts generally sell fast. Be creative in acquiring t-shirts. You can have them professionally screened, make them yourself with stencils, etc. The money that is made from selling the t-shirts is a great way to cover various unexpected costs of the event.

#### **Dealing with the administration:**

College and university administrations are notoriously meddlesome in the affairs of student activists. For some reason, they always seem to ask us to compromise our rights to assembly and free speech. The Tent State staff should develop a policy: If anyone is asked to meet with a college administrator, they should respond by saying, "I have a responsibility to bring this up to the Tent State democratic collective. We will contact you about setting up a meeting." This policy takes the pressure off of individuals and puts the group as a whole in the forefront. United we stand, divided we fall.

Further, remember that although Tent State is much more than a protest, it is still a protest event. We do not ask permission to have a protest. At times, administrators can be worked with, but there are more times when they must be reminded that the most important political tool we have is the exercise of our constitutional rights. Nobody can grant or revoke our permission to exercise these.

#### **Dealing with the Media:**

A small but well-oiled media team needs to be responsible for sending our press advisories and releases to local and extra-local media before and during the Tent State event. It is recommended that the Tent State staff hold at least two press

conferences or public events in the two weeks prior to Tent State. Instructions as to how to organize and hold a press conference can be found at a variety of websites. Also, keep an eye out for reporters who write articles related to the topics important to your organizing; they will be more apt to pick up your story. Keep the following in mind:

We strongly suggest you follow up each press advisory (the fax/email you send announcing the press event) with a personal phone call to the reporter.

Talk to reporters as if they are clueless, because many of them are.

Designate specific people to talk to the press. These people should be prepared to put out the groups' message in a clear, quotable way. Ideally, have diverse representation of the coalition address the press

Follow up with reporters on the phone after each press event.

Further, have organizers and coalition members write letters to the editor and opinions articles in campus, local, and national papers and magazines. Look for local or other radio and TV stations who may want to interview organizers and coalition members about the event. Anything you can do to increase publicity and awareness of the event is good.

### **Contacting Legislators:**

**A. Overview:** Contacting legislators is a way of informing elected representatives of the actions their constituents want them to take and of the level of mobilization that Tent State makes possible. It is recommended that Tent State organizers research their state legislative structure. Legislative maps and district listings are publicly available and can usually be found online for both state and national governmental agencies. Learn who your representatives are on all levels and take note of their contact information. All of this information should be gathered and organized in advance.

**B. Research:** All states have state assemblies that consist of elected representatives who meet in the state capitol to vote on legislation. Each representative has a district in which his or her constituency resides.

On a national level, each state is represented by two senators and a number of congressmen determined by state population. The senators represent the entire state while the congressmen have individual districts within the state. Obtaining this information can also be done online.

Gathering this information has two purposes. First, to better understand state and federal government bodies, and second, so these representatives can be contacted and compelled to endorse and support Tent State and its mission statement.

**C. Pre-Tent State Contact:** A formal letter of introduction, along with Tent State informational packets, should be sent to all state and federal representatives weeks before Tent State starts. In addition to a letter, these packets should include the Tent State statement of purpose, your list of demands, a list of endorsing organizations, and an option for the legislator to endorse the good work being done on the organizers' campus and across the country.

**D. Tent State Contact:** At a minimum, Tent State organizers should plan to secure one area of their Tent State campus for the purpose of contacting legislators. As University students pass by Tent State and are engaged by campers, they should be persuaded to call their representatives on the spot. In the past, Tent State at

Rutgers has had staff members with cell phones at hand to lend to passersby and campers for this purpose.

Here is an example of how one might want to go about addressing their legislator:

"Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, I am a student at \_\_\_\_\_, you represent my district, and right now I am a part of a huge Tent University with \_\_\_#\_\_\_ of tents where students are assembling to demand that, as my representative, you fully fund public institutions of higher education and support an end to the militarization of this country...etc."

We recommend having rap sheets ready for students who do not feel comfortable speaking without a guide.

We also advise listing a few of the demands established by the particular Tent State campaign from which the calls are being made.

**Post-Tent State Contact:** It is also important that Tent State organizers continue to remind forgetful representatives of the issues they must continue to support. Throughout the course of Tent State organizing, plans should be made as to how, especially in the summer months, Tent State organizers will keep the pressure on representatives when they vote on the state budget. A steady phone calling and letter writing campaign is strongly advised. It is important to demonstrate to representatives that Tent State is not a passing event, but rather a growing national consensus that, for example, this country MUST fund education and MUST cease its continuing militarization of our human and natural resources.

### **III. LEADING THE TENT STATE EVENT:**

#### **Participants, Campers, Staff:**

There will be three types of people at Tent State: participants (who are there as activists to learn from and enjoy the events of the day and/or evening), campers (who commit to most or all of the event) and staff/organizers. Staff participation needs to be coordinated so that there is always staff present, but no one gets overworked and burnt out. It is a good idea to come up with some sort of identifying symbol or piece of clothing (particular t-shirts or arm bands work nicely) so that staff can be easily recognized. Try to organize new people and participants into greater responsibilities, if possible. If too many new people end up helping, that is a good problem. You should always be prepared to give people as much work as they ask for. Also, be prepared to delegate committed campers as staff. This brings new people into the movement and creates an environment of active participation.

#### **Positive Living:**

Avoid the rigid and often-paranoid 'security mentality'. Do not divorce the security teams (the "feelgood patrols") from the group as a whole. Use the power of numbers to create a good-living environment where it is clear that trouble is not welcome. Avoid needless confrontation with irrelevant hecklers and other instigators of trouble. Keep things cool. Explain to people calmly that certain types of activities (drug use and underage drinking) should not take place within Tent State because they jeopardize the focus and success of the event. Giving a core group of organizers non-violent, conflict resolution training can be effective not only for the group as a whole, but can also be pleasing to the administration and campus security.

**Clean Up:**

Clean up must involve just about everyone. This will only happen if it is organized with established point people for each day of the event. Also, clean up must be officially scheduled in order to make sure it is a collective effort and also to avoid competing with other activities.

**Scaling the Event and Going with the Flow:**

Mass sustained events can and will take on a life of their own the more successful they are. As soon as there are enough people there that you do not personally know most of them, you should allow for more flexibility in your thinking and schedule. Good planning will make this easier. By keeping good records of all the participants who sign up in the weeks leading up to Tent State, you will have some idea of your starting point in terms of numbers (the baseline). Make sure that you have planned accordingly (selected a meeting area that is big enough, planned for enough tents, access to bathroom facilities, etc.). As the event grows, be ready to reassess the needs of Tent State everyday and to get creative if the infrastructure needs to grow quickly. For example, in 2003 at Tent State New Brunswick (NJ), our first real indicator came the first night that we had bands play and several hundred students showed up, far exceeding our expectations. If most people naturally show up later or earlier than the scheduled time for the daily assembly, consider changing the time for the next day to accommodate the organic flow of the event.

If the event gets much bigger than planned, assess the mood of the people and the political situation on your campus and make additional demands of the university. Considering additional tactics to get goals accomplished (e.g. direct action, etc.).

**Tent State as an ongoing forum:**

Encourage discussions on any and all progressive topics. MAKE SURE THAT DIFFERENT GROUPS INTERACT WITH ONE ANOTHER AND DO NOT REMAIN AS CLIQUES (LEAD BY EXAMPLE!). Help everyone realize how much of a learning experience Tent State is and segue into a discussion about the role of the university in promoting progressive ideas and building progressive communities.

**Follow up and recruitment:**

Tent State is very demanding of people's time and energy. Everyone will need a break to recover. Make sure to plan for post Tent State activities BEFORE Tent State starts. We recommend inviting, while at Tent State, new core organizers to a planned retreat over the summer where the Tent State experience can be discussed in the more in-depth context of progressive organizing in general. Plan a continuation committee for the next year before Tent State begins.

**Enjoy the Show and Be Proud of Your Work:**

Despite all the time, energy, and commitment involved with Tent State, make sure you take breaks and allow yourself to enjoy the Tent State experience like someone who excitedly happens upon it, if only for a little while... During the course of the event, always remember why you are doing this and be proud of the experience you have created: Tent State is an event that can change people's perspectives on the world and their power to change it.

*(Tent State University, Rutgers, NJ Mission Statement 2005)*

## **THE COALITION FOR THE RIGHT TO AN EDUCATION**

### **Education, Not War!**

We the undersigned members of Tent State University demand full and restored support of public higher education and a re-evaluation of our state and national spending priorities.

Education is a fundamental human right. Today, our society recognizes higher education as a necessity to produce an educated citizenry that can participate in our democracy and compete in the labor market to earn enough income to support a family. Despite this fact, support for education is decreasing. Meanwhile, military spending is rapidly increasing. In 2003, the Federal Government allocated only \$53.1 billion to the Department of Education while spending for the Department of Defense was \$365.3 billion. The President's FY2005 request for military spending is \$420.7 billion dollars. These figures do not take into account the \$150+ billion that has already been spent on the war in Iraq. This is clear evidence of a devastating shift in national spending priorities for which our generation is paying.

New Jersey, one of the wealthiest states in the union, ranks a lowly 47<sup>th</sup> in its support for higher education. New Jersey has decreased its contribution to Rutgers University from 64% to 51% of the university budget since 1992, while finding over \$6 billion to spend on the war in Iraq. Tuition at Rutgers has risen over 150% in the past 10 years.

Across the United States, public higher education is losing support, and access to a quality education is systematically being denied to our communities. The contribution by Rutgers to the wider New Brunswick working-class community is negligible. For example, only a handful of New Brunswick High School graduates attend the public university which sits within their very own city. The dismantling of higher learning has an especially detrimental impact on working, middle-class, and minority families. We acknowledge tuition increases and scholarship cuts to be methods of exclusion that disproportionately affect those communities that public education is intended to serve. The average college student works more hours, graduates in debt, and must focus more on 'getting by' than on the quality of their education. In order to finance their education many students are enticed into military service.

The history of the United States, from the women's suffragist movement to the civil rights movement, has involved the expansion of access to public higher education while our generation's era is marked with its destruction.

We demand our future to be one of life and learning. We reject a mentality of fear and ignorance.

**We demand full funding for our public institutions of higher learning and oppose the reckless squander of life and resources through the militarization of our national agenda. We oppose the dismantling of public education through tuition increases and privatization. We demand that Rutgers be an asset instead of a burden to the community. Education is necessary because it is a vital resource for building a positive future for our world.**

*87% of Americans see a college degree as having replaced the high school degree as an important and necessary level of education. See The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education at:*

*[http://www.highereducation.org/news/news\\_050300.shtml](http://www.highereducation.org/news/news_050300.shtml)*

*Media Matters for America <http://mediamatters.org/items/200407020002>*

*Global Issues That Affect Everyone*

*<http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/ArmsTrade/Spending.asp#USMilitarySpending>*

*"New Jersey ranks 39th nationally in state and local funding for higher education on a per capita basis, and 47th in higher education spending per \$1,000 of personal income. We cannot continue to lag behind nearly every other state in recognizing this economic imperative" - Rutgers University President Richard McCormick: Brain Drain Threatens New Jersey's Economic Development. January, 2005.*

**SUPPORT THE TENT STATE  
UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT!**

***SEND YOUR DONATIONS TO:***

**Rutgers University  
PO Box 30214 RPO Way  
c/o Erik Straub  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
(make checks out to "Tent State University")**

**QUESTIONS? SUGGESTIONS? COMMENTS?**

**[info@tentstate.com](mailto:info@tentstate.com)**

*The original Tent State University organizing model was written in 2005 by organizers from the Community Empowerment Project in New Brunswick, NJ. It was revised by Tent State organizers from Rutgers University, University of California-Santa Cruz, and University of Massachusetts-Amherst later that year. The current and third edition was revised by Rutgers Tent State organizers in 2007.*