Building Our Power to Make Change and Stay in School: Student Leadership Councils

by Ami Magisos and Robert Ojeda

Student leadership and civic education have been an integral part of adult education at Pima Community College in Tucson, AZ, where Student Leadership Councils (SLC) are built into each of our schools. Strong student leaders serve as a bridge between students, staff, and community, and together build the power to make the changes that students want to see in the school and community. Through the course of ten weeks to a year, student leaders:

• find and strengthen their voices, and learn to work together
• identify and explore an important problem affecting students and the community
• plan and carry out an action together
• evaluate and reflect on what they’ve accomplished and learned in the process.

STAGE 1: Building a Team

The first meeting of an SLC is all about the students getting to know each other and learning how they can work together to make change.

The students, who represent the full range of adult education, look a little uncomfortable at first. The facilitator welcomes the group, and everyone shares why they’ve come and what expectations they have for the SLC. Students pair up and talk in depth about who they are and what’s most important to them in the school and community. In this first meeting, new students hear from experienced ones about what the Council has accomplished before, like raising money for school equipment and advocating for a night bus route to the center for the evening students. By the end of the meeting, participants are smiling and chatting and making plans to tell their classes about the Council.

STAGE 2: Choosing and Exploring a Problem

The next step is to identify and analyze a problem. It’s time to figure out what’s going on in the school and community and consider how the group can make a difference. Sometimes students or staff come to the Council with something they see as a problem. Leaders in the Council share their own experiences with the problem and ask their classmates, which helps them determine how common and how serious the problem really is. They also consider if the problem is something that they can influence. If it’s something that would take years to change, they might decide they’re not ready to take it on in the Council. Sometimes even big problems, however, can be broken down into small solutions that are manageable as a project in a Council.

“The problem is vandalism in our parking lot,” the manager of the learning center tells the Student Leadership Council facilitator. “Is this true?” the facilitator asks the group at the next meeting. Students share stories they’ve heard about car break-ins, stolen stereos, and suspicious characters in the school parking lot. They talk about how many students are hesitant to come to school due to safety problems. “We’ve got to do something about this!” one student leader says. An-

Student leaders in Tucson exploring a possible action.
other suggests that the group find out how many people
are affected in the school. To learn more, they plan to
conduct an informal survey.

As student leaders consider creative ideas to
solve the problem, they also need to consider who
has power over the problem: The students them-

selves? The school? The neighborhood? The local,
state, or federal government? The area businesses?
The following week, sharing the stories they collected
from their classes, they decide it’s time for action. “How
can we learn more about security in our parking lot?
What has happened in the past and who has helped us
before?” asks the facilitator. Students discuss different
options: putting up signs, organizing student patrols,
planning police safety workshops, or getting a security
guard. Students interview the school directors and find
out that the city government has not been helpful in the
past, so they decide to start “closer to home.”

STAGE 3: Taking Action

It’s challenging to take action in a group. Often in
Councils, leaders want to get out and solve their
problems themselves — patrol the parking lot,
buy the needed equipment, or take turns doing
daycare. However, sometimes the system needs
to change for the solution to last, and the student
leaders’ work is to pressure people who work in
the system to take their needs into account. In the
case of school parking lot safety, students carefully
plan to bring their concerns and ideas to the right
people: the managers and dean of the program,
who both share their concerns and who could
find some resources to address the problem. The
facilitator helps them think through how to create
a meeting where the students remain in control of
what is happening, and where they are clearly able
to express their stories about the problem and their
proposals for change. This preparation is critical to
the success of the action.

Students invite the managers and the dean to come talk
about the problem, and they spend the next SLC meet-
ings learning how to lead an effective public meeting.
They collect background on the interests of their guests
and they plan the roles that each student will have in
the meeting.

The big evening comes: students are nervous, but
they support each other. “We are the ones running this
meeting, let’s remember that,” says one student. When
the guests arrive, the students feel intimidated, but
follow their plan and describe the problem and impact
of crime in the parking lot. One student leader shares
a story about having his car broken into and how in-
secure and suspicious he now feels coming to school,
even though he is committed to studying. After discuss-
ing some possible solutions, the dean says, “There is a
chance we could bring a security guard to the center.
I’ll look into it and let you know what I find out.”

STAGE 4: Evaluating the process

The final step is to evaluate what was learned
through the process of creating change. Even when
the action doesn’t completely solve the problem,
the students can still learn from their reflections.
Often, they realize that there are other questions
they still have or there are other actions they can
take that they didn’t see before.

In the next Council meeting, students evalu-
ate how it went with the managers and the dean.

I was surprised that I wasn’t afraid to talk to them.
They were listening to me,” says one student. “I felt
comfortable because each of us had a specific role. And
we responded carefully to what they said,” another stu-
dent comments. “It was easier than I thought for us to
do this together!” says one young GED student.

A few weeks later, the Dean arranges for a secu-
rity guard at the school. The guard starts watching over
the parking lot, and vandalism and theft are markedly
reduced at the school. The student leaders report back to
their classes what has happened.

In the process of building their team, choos-
ing and exploring a problem, and carefully taking
action, student leaders increase their power to
make change and create the conditions they need
to stay in school.

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