

How To Start and Run a PON Student Discussion Group

by Danika Swanson and Sarah Woodside, Fall 2007

Overview

What is a PON Student Discussion Group?

Each year, students have initiated and facilitated a number of PON Student Discussion Groups, based on a strong interest to engage in interdisciplinary analysis of negotiation and conflict resolution-related topics. The purpose of the Discussion Groups is to bring students with a shared interest together to explore the nuances of a topic and to share professional experiences and research findings.

Typically, Discussion Group meetings begin with a presentation by a guest speaker or group member, followed by a round-table discussion, though any format may be adopted by the Group. Based on PON's mandate of inclusion, the Discussion Groups are open to students from all Boston-area schools and can be joined at any time throughout the year.

The First Student Discussion Group: A History

The first PON Student Discussion Group was formed in 2004. *The Religion and Conflict Student Discussion Group* began with a few students, primarily from Harvard Divinity School and other Boston Theological Institute schools, interested in the intersection of religion and conflict. Initially they met informally off campus to discuss relevant issues. Today, the group, now called *Religion, Conflict and Peace*, meets regularly at Harvard Law School and brings in speakers with diverse and extensive backgrounds and areas of expertise. It has expanded to include students from schools throughout Boston. While the membership, leadership and specific focus have all shifted over the years according to changing interests and political/global trends, the commitment to discussing issues related to religion and conflict resolution has remained constant.

Past and Present Student Discussion Groups

Often the topics around which groups develop are cutting edge and/or currently underrepresented among course offerings.

Current Student Discussion Groups:

- Religion, Conflict, and Peace Discussion Group (2004-present)
- Conflict in Africa (2007-present)
- Peacemaking from the Inside-Out (2007-present)

Past Student Discussion Groups:

- Negotiation and Nonviolent Action Student Task Force (2006-2007)
- Women and Negotiation (2006-2007)
- The Transboundary Water Management Group (2004-2006)
- Peacemaking from the Ground Up (2006-2007)
- The Sudan Student Discussion Group (2004-2005)

How To Organize and Run a Student Discussion Group

General Information

If you have an idea for a Discussion Group and would like to facilitate or co-facilitate the process, approach PON's Student Interest Group Coordinator. PON is always enthusiastic about supporting student initiatives! The coordinator can help you initiate the process with PON's support.

As the leader of a Discussion Group, you are responsible for the planning that comes along with organizing all group related events. This will include inviting speakers or planning discussions, setting dates and times, working with the SIG Coordinator to secure rooms and order refreshments, and creating publicity for the event.

PON will support the group in terms of providing its name, space and sponsorship. It is not, however, able to provide honorariums for speakers.

In an effort to assist you in organizing your student discussion group, PON has created the following checklist that may help guide you through the process and throughout the year.

Pre-Planning (Before the first meeting of the semester)

- ___ Start as early as possible in the year/semester.
- ___ Publicize your first meeting through the SIG listserv, any relevant listservs from former Student Discussion Groups, in classes you or fellow students may be taking, at the PON Open House in September, etc. The SIG Coordinator is your contact person for these resources.
- ___ Send out e-mail announcements for your first meeting encouraging students to use this opportunity to help shape the semester's events and to come and share their ideas

for:

- speakers,
- articles to read, or
- topics for discussion.

___ Include in your first e-mail your contact information and encourage students with inquiries or interest in your group to contact you. Make sure that students know that the group is open to all who are interested, regardless of background, experience, or consistent availability throughout the year.

___ If you are a returning or continuing group, it is a good idea to send a list of previous programming to give students a feel for the range of topics you have covered.

___ If you have already planned events for the coming year, include these in your preliminary e-mail.

First Meeting

___ Have a sign-up sheet for the names and emails of those present.

___ Make sure to allow time for students to introduce themselves and identify their interests, affiliations and expectations. You may want to record this info.

___ Get student input and ideas for topics, speakers, books/articles to discuss, etc.

___ If you want student input on the group's focus, format, or mission, brainstorm during this meeting.

___ Make sure people are on the same page as to what they would like to see the group do and/or accomplish during the year or recognize differences.

___ Get a feel for how involved people would like to be (and will be able to be) in the Discussion Group.

___ Decide how often the group will meet, (this may be regularly or irregularly/ad hoc) and what the meeting format will be. Some good options that past groups have chosen are:

- Inviting guest speakers
- Roundtable discussions
- Taking turns presenting your own student research
- Combining academic literature with timely popular press articles
- Combining the group's activity with already existing programs such as seminars or brown bag lunches

After the First Meeting

- ___ You may want to formulate a mission statement, ideally with the input you gathered from the first meeting. (See Appendix B for example)
- ___ Send this and/or a description of the Discussion Group to the SIG Coordinator to be posted on the PON website, along with your contact info.
- ___ If you plan to co-facilitate or delegate planning tasks, set this up as soon as possible.
- ___ Email a thank you and any additional or follow up information to those who attended.

Where to find Speakers

1. Boston-area faculty/practitioners that you or others know of.
2. Check relevant Boston-area conference and research center schedules for speakers coming to the area. Contact them (or have the Student Interest Group Coordinator do so on your behalf) asking if they might be willing to present to your Discussion Group while they are in town. Often an invitation to speak at Harvard Law School is a draw.
3. Seek out student speakers who may be able to present based on past internships and work in relevant fields.
4. If you are planning larger events, consider collaborating with other groups or departments on campus.

Once Speakers and Events are Arranged

- ___ Publicize your event. Some favorite methods of publicizing events include:
 - Advertise on SIG listserv via SIG Coordinator.
 - Email your members and other negotiation group listserv coordinators and ask them to disseminate the info.
 - Send information to relevant group and department listservs on campus.
 - Encourage friends and classmates to attend.
 - Make announcements at community/department gatherings.
 - Make announcements in relevant classes.
 - Poster in schools and departments where students are likely to be interested in your topic/event.

Presentation Advice

- If you have a presenter, keep the presentation to less than 45 minutes.
- Follow presentations with a substantial Q and A period.
- As the leader, have some prepared questions for a presenter in order to encourage conversation and informal discussion after presentations. Encourage your student group members to prepare questions in advance as well.
- Check to see if the speakers have a reading they want distributed in advance.
- Discourage speakers from using PowerPoint (to encourage discussion) except for showing photos, maps, etc.
- Suggested length of a meeting is no more than 1hr and 30 min.

Finally, feel free to contact the PON Student Interest Group Coordinator (sig@law.harvard.edu) for any advice, help, support, or anything else you may need.