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For years, some students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) have had trouble fulfilling their curricula in the life sciences without compromising their beliefs—they were penalized for refusing to dissect or vivisect. Starting in the fall of 2001, Students Improving the Lives of Animals (SILA) decided to do something about it. As soon as the group formed, we were immediately contacted by students who had experienced difficulties ranging from being denied alternatives, intimidation by faculty, and even having to change their major to avoid dissection. Some more fortunate students had been accommodated with alternatives, but there was no consistency, since there was no official policy.

Several meetings with faculty and administration made it clear that they did not see a problem with the current system. As a result, SILA took up the campaign with the student government, and was able to convince some student senators to help. The process of moving a policy through government was convoluted, and passed through several different committees. Along the way, both SILA and the government did a lot of research, and both students and faculty presented their opinions. After the long process of revision and bureaucracy had run its course, the policy was voted on by the Senate at large, and they passed it.

While this may sound straightforward, there were a lot of sticking points along the way. First, we had to convince key members of the student government that the issue was worth their time to address. The administration and UIUC Senate were much more willing to interact with members of the student government than they were with SILA.

Another problem was that our argument had to be impeccable. While the faculty opposing us could draw upon their reputations and simply state that it was their expert opinion that a policy was a bad idea, we had to rely on facts. When asked a question, we had to be able not only to answer it but to provide references proving what we had said. This was true of the scientific research, legal argument, philosophical points, and more. At all steps along the process, there were opponents trying to make us falter.

Through this process, we learned a lot about what worked and what didn't. The first step was networking. We contacted as many people as possible for support. This included students who had negative experiences (to prove the need for policy), student organizations (especially religious ones) to show support for the policy, faculty members to counteract the faculty opposing us, national organizations like AAVS and HSUS to provide resources and support, and student government members (to actually set the wheels in motion).

The second important task was research. Before going into meetings, we would be sure that we had covered all our bases, especially the scientific and legal support for alternatives. We would try to have different group members 'specialize' in different topics to aid in this process. We also worked hard on presenting our information in a format that made it easy to read (see our resource guide at [www.dissectionchoice.org](http://www.dissectionchoice.org)).

Probably the third really important component of our success was professionalism and the ability to appear moderate. It was essential to be able to dress well, speak calmly and rationally even throughout personal attacks, and to stay away from the label of “animal rights activists.” As much as possible, we portrayed this as a students’ rights issue rather than an animal welfare issue. We also made it clear that we were just trying to get students the choice not to dissect, rather than ending dissection in general. While we used local media to spread awareness, we were careful not to attack the University or anyone working on the issue, even our opponents. As a result, the Senate came to understand the strength of our beliefs without associating us with extremism.

Now that the policy has been passed here, SILA hopes to make our website into a resource for other student groups, and to provide information currently unavailable elsewhere. For anyone working to get an alternatives policy passed, please visit [www.dissectionchoice.org](http://www.dissectionchoice.org), and feel free to contact us for help on your campaign