Strategy College

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
In June 2019, the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) and People’s Action teamed up to co-host an inaugural Strategy College for some of the nation’s leading social justice organizers. We aimed to build a deep bench of long-term strategists equipped to move big ideas and deep structural change.

The Strategy College convened more than 40 leaders from a broad cross-section of social movement sectors. We invited organizations that are often forced to emphasize differences as they compete for funding and public recognition, knowing that space to develop long-term strategy together would help transcend manufactured divisions. Surrounded by the beauty of summer in rural Minnesota, participants stepped out of their everyday lives and into an immersive seven-day experience intentionally designed to forge new communities of practice.

Building on long-standing GPP and People’s Action frameworks, we created a curriculum that integrated systems analysis (what we are up against and how intertwined systems perpetuate economic, racial, gender and climate injustice) with strategy tools (practices that advance structural shifts and transformational organizing). We provided participants time to connect real-world examples with complex ideas, highlighting strategic practice and inviting organizers to share transformational campaigns.

**AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMS**

Mainstream dialogue about race, class and gender is frustratingly limited. It asks us to choose: Which matters most – racial justice, economic inequality, gendered violence or climate change? We set out to develop a more integrated framework that expands political possibilities by clarifying our shared interest in systems change.

- We started our systems analysis through the lens of “racial capitalism,” working to
understand the way race and class have reinforced each other throughout US history.

• Building on this analysis, we examined how gender inequality manifests in the economy.
• We then looked at the ways in which extraction and commodification of the Earth form the foundation of racial capitalism.

Building on this integrated systems analysis, we explored how these systems manifest on a global scale; how governmental policies and agencies often maintain and strengthen inequalities; and how oppressive ideas have become “common sense” in our society.

We also spent time examining how this integrated system evolved throughout US history and particularly in the development of the neoliberal project over the last 40 years.

TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

If we aim to end these injustices and rebuild the structure of our society, we need to move from transactional approaches toward transformational organizing. To support this shift, we introduced strategic frameworks and tools that help organizations formalize changes in practice.

• Beginning with the Three Faces of Power, a framework adapted by GPP, participants explored what it takes to reshape the political terrain.

• Next, participants conceptualized their campaigns as stepping-stones that leverage shorter-term fights to move us toward structural reforms and, eventually, structural change. We refer to this process as the Long-term Agenda Tool, a strategic plan that helps organizations align their collective work to achieve transformational goals.

• Finally, participants explored strategies for building an inclusive, multi-racial popular movement that connects communities and sectors around a shared agenda. We called this Building the Bigger We.

TAKING IT BACK HOME

With attention to pedagogy and relationship building, the Strategy College gave participants space to interrogate their organizing methods and identify the shifts they need to make.

We heard insights from a panel of leaders in Minnesota reflecting on factors that enabled labor, community and faith-based groups to coordinate campaigns and build governing power in Minnesota. These included: 1) adapting the Three Faces of Power; 2) investing in deep relationship-building; 3) engaging both leaders and members in ongoing political education; and 4) strategic use of narrative shifts as part of organizing, alliance-building and campaigns.

There is good news: these shifts toward transformational organizing are already happening. New leaders in our movements are bringing fresh perspectives, a hunger for deeper engagement with ideas and a willingness to experiment with new forms of organizing.
OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS

The Strategy College was designed to support this new generation of leaders — and it did. Again and again, participants reflected that the Strategy College allowed them to take a huge collective step forward toward a stronger movement. As a result:

• National community federations stepped out of day-to-day work and discovered deep political and strategic resonance. This has manifested in greater cross-organizational collaboration, particularly in developing joint training programs.

• Participants from Florida’s State-Wide Alignment Group ran a tailored “Bigger We” training for their member organizations. Groups began to look beyond “electoral math” to consider expansive approaches building from their urban bases in communities of color while building power in suburban and rural regions.

• Organizers from California and Florida benefited from hearing about the long-term investment in narrative work in Minnesota, and from electoral strategies to change the balance of power in New York State.

As an experiment in advanced political education and movement building, the Strategy College moved us closer to truly transformational organizing models and the bold vision we need.

We plan to organize another Strategy College in late 2020 where we will train even more long-term strategists and provide organizers with space to reflect and respond to the 2020 Election.

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