

Draft Help!

Organizing Against the Vietnam War, 1967-1973

Context

This collection of documents from the Valley Peace Center Records helps students and teachers to explore:

- Resistance to the Vietnam War (1955 – 1975)
- Using organizational papers as historical evidence

Introduction and Background Information for Students

This document collection from the Valley Peace Center Records at the University of Massachusetts Amherst allows students to expand their understanding of the choices facing young men and their families in communities throughout the United States as they responded to the draft for the Vietnam War. A selection of government documents from the Valley Peace Center records can also help students understand that organizing against the draft required sound knowledge of complex and changing laws: protest movements did more than write placards and march in the streets. They also consulted with lawyers and counseled young men of draft age, created and distributed vast libraries of informational literature, and ran volunteer organizations on tight budgets.

Before examining these documents, students should have a basic understanding of the chronology of the conflict, including growing opposition to American involvement in the war beginning in the mid-1960s. A lesson based on these documents might begin with a brief institutional history of the Valley Peace Center (see the finding aid for the entire collection). Alternatively, considering projecting a single document like the draft number chart or the Selective Service System Classification Questionnaire, or asking men in the class if they themselves registered with the Selective Service when they turned eighteen. Then ask students to brainstorm what they know about how the process of being drafted actually occurred.

Discussion

Consider beginning the class discussion by having students indicate how they would have responded to the draft. Put a spectrum of options (active duty, conscientious objector, refusing to register, emigration to Canada) on the board, and ask each student to put their initials on the spectrum.

Distribute packets of documents that draw from all three sections of the *Source, Story, History* site (conscientious objection, refusing to register, emigration) and ask each student to read a document that reflects a choice that is different from their own. After five minutes, open the floor to discussion. Ask for volunteers to show their initials on the spectrum, explain their own choice, and summarize the document. Ask students whether the document changed their opinion, or their understanding of what conscientious objection, refusing to register, or emigration might have involved.

Draft Help!

Organizing Against the Vietnam War, 1967-1973

Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- Ask students to consider the question, “What constitutes a courageous response to the draft?” Then review the January 1971 open letter on “Why I refuse to register” and the 1952 account of an appearance by a conscientious objector before a local draft board. Open the floor to discussion and additional questions: were the men in these documents “courageous”? Were their actions commendable? How would you have responded to questioning by a hostile draft board, or trial by jury in federal court?
- Review the Selective Service System letter to a local principal about “Curriculum Guide to the Draft.” Ask students to think about their own experience as high school students, and what it would have been like to take a course about the draft, in addition to driver's education or gym. Give students five minutes to write down their own questions or reactions to the letter, giving examples such as “what kind of information did the curriculum include?” or “were teachers who opposed the war required to teach the curriculum?” Open the floor to discussion, emphasizing that the letter alone cannot answer these questions.
- Use the June 24, 1970 issue of “Notes from the Valley Peace Center” as a starting point for a discussion about using organizational papers as historical evidence. Ask students to speculate on how representative documents from the Valley Peace Center, an institution based a college town in the northeastern, are of the experience of resistance to the draft throughout the United States. Brainstorm other sources (similar document collections at other repositories, newspaper coverage of anti-draft activism, secondary scholarship on organizations like the American Friends Service Committee, etc.) that could provide additional information or alternative points of view.