

Bigger Crowd and Better Shows: Scheduling

by Del Suggs

Scheduling is comprehensive, and encompasses nearly everything you do in campus events. It's like journalism-- it's the "who, what, when, where, and why" of activities programming (although we'll actually consider these five things in reverse order from the old expression.) A variety of factors come in to play when dealing with each facet of programming. Let's consider each component, and some of the variables you have to deal with.

"Why" have an event

There are basically two reasons to have an event: to "piggyback" or to "fill." A "piggyback" event is scheduled to occur in conjunction with other events. A "fill" event is scheduled because nothing else is happening.

Many of your campus traditions are built around piggybacking events. Consider "Welcome Back Week." On most campuses, the Welcome Back Week includes one or more concerts, maybe a dance, a comedian, perhaps a picnic, a special assembly, and more. See how these events are all concurrent with each other? It's the same with a "Spring Fling" or "Fall Frolics", even Homecoming is a number of piggybacked events.

Piggybacking events creates a "critical mass" of activities that

infuses a festive atmosphere on campus. It generates strong positive feelings towards the campus community. Each individual event would not be effective, but the combination of events engenders a snowball effect.

A "Fill" event is just as it sounds: it fills a hole in your calendar. Most campuses have traditional events that occur every year, such as Welcome Back, Homecoming, maybe a Founder's Week, Parent's Weekend, and more. These are generally planned first, as a part of the scheduling process.

At that point, you can begin your fill scheduling. Perhaps your program board looked at their Fall calendar and realized that during the middle of October there is nothing going on. The program board then books a show for that time period-- it's a fill event. It fills up that gap in your activities calendar.

Depending on your budget and your program board, you may try to have events as often as every day (at a large school) or as seldom as once a semester (at a very small or poorly funded school). Some gaps are important. You don't want to burn-out your program board, or have their grades suffer. But, as a rule, you don't want to go too long without a campus event. Look ahead for opportunities for fill programs.

There is a third type of program option called "counterprogramming." This consists of two programs occurring at the same time, but appealing to different audiences. It is simple to do, because you're just presenting an alternative event to an existing one. It can be effective, if you have the clearly delineated target audiences.

One example might be scheduling an event for the rest of campus during your traditional "Greek Week." If everyone on your campus isn't involved in the fraternities, then they may attend your counter event. And counter doesn't mean "anti"-- it doesn't need to be in opposition of the other event. But, if the Ku Klux Klan had a rally planned in your town, might consider planning a "Celebration of Diversity" to show the campus disdain for their narrowmindedness.

Another example of counter programming might be a special Family night. Instead of having one family-friendly entertainer play for children and adults, you could consider having a children's performer in one venue and a college performer in another venue. The parents could enjoy their show, and the children in the next room could enjoy their own show.

"Where" to have an event

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Some schools have beautiful facilities. They have an incredible performance hall, a cozy little theater, a delightful coffeehouse in the student center, maybe a plaza or courtyard just made for an event. If your school has great facilities, and the students attend your shows there, then you can skip on to the next section. But not most schools. Most schools have to make the best of whatever facilities they have. Or, a school may have wonderful places for events-- but nobody ever attends performances there. If you've ever had 25 people show up for a show in a 500-seat hall, this may sound painfully familiar.

Sometimes the best place to have an event is not where you would expect. That's why cafeteria shows are so popular on commuter campuses. That's why poolside "dive-in movies" are popular. That's why students will sit outside on the student center green to hear a band, but won't walk 25 yards to sit inside the auditorium and hear the same band in comfort.

Maybe it's the novelty. Maybe it's laziness. Maybe it's something else. But for whatever reason, shows in unusual places seem to work. So consider some alternative program sites to your auditorium.

The student center lobby can work. So can the cafeteria. If you have dorms, consider doing a show in a dorm lobby or television lounge. Look around for courtyards, green spaces, and patios for outdoor shows.

Walk around your campus, and look at where the students congregate. If you can't get them to come to your shows, then find a way to take your shows to them!

"When" to have an event

It's often a struggle trying to find the best day and time for an event. There are many factors to consider: venue availability, audience, other campus and off-campus events, class schedule, etc. In addition, some schools have additional challenges, such as commuter schools with a reduced evening population.

You may need to rethink your traditional event days and times. If students no longer attend your Friday night programs, maybe you need to present them on a week night instead. Find out what nights-- and days-- are good for programming, and what times are best.

If you do daytime shows, go to your Registrar's Office and find out what days have the most students. Find out the peak class hours, too. You may find, for example, that Wednesdays have the most

students in the 10 am class and that the second highest peak is the 1 pm class. You have just discovered that many students will be out of class between 11 am and 1 pm on Wednesday-- perhaps the best day and time for an event.

Television can be a force on campus. Ask anyone who had a Thursday night show opposite the final "Seinfeld" show! If a particular night begins to really hold students, then you'd better not schedule anything opposite-- unless it's a big screen TV watching party in the Student Center.

But don't forget the concept of counterprogramming. If "Billy's Pub" has a Beer Bust on Wednesday night (and all the students go there), maybe you should consider offering an alternative event on campus. If your campus is a "suitcase college" where most students leave on the weekend, then you need to consider weekend programs. Maybe students leave because there's nothing to do. But if you try to break those patterns, be prepared for the long-haul. It may take months, or even years, of counterprogramming before the students stop going to Billy's Pub or going home on weekends and attend your events.

"What" to have at an event

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There are an amazing array of acts you can have on your campus. It ranges from completely automated computer simulations to live performers. There are static games, interactive rides, singers, comedians, movies, jugglers, lecturers, inflatables, mimes, musicians, and so much more.

You really need to consider the range of students on your campus when you begin to decide on what type of act or event to present. Sometimes the events will simply reflect the composition of the program board. If your program board is all "traditional" students between the ages of 18 and 22, then your activities might be skewed towards their favorite acts. Consider the depth of your student population, and try to provide something for everyone. Your median student age might be much older than your program board's median age, as older students are less inclined (or have less time) to become involved in campus affairs.

Try surveying your student body, and see what types of acts and events they might enjoy. Find a way to get an even distribution of students, not just morning classes or evening students. Perhaps a professor or graduate student would be willing to help you prepare and administer your polling.

Be careful that you don't sabotage your survey, or weight it in ways they will invalidate the results. And try to be aware of areas where your students may be ignorant-- just because you know what an "inflatable" game is (like a Velcro Wall or Bungee Run), your students may not be familiar with the concept. The same with music-- if you ask them about a coffeehouse show, they may say "no" just because they don't like coffee. They may not even know what a coffeehouse show is. Or a "Comedy Club"-- they might not want to "join" a comedy club, when you really mean attending a performance!

Don't forget the "educational component" of your program board. Your programs should be more than just "fun and games." They should be "co-curricular" events, which provide an additional opportunity for learning. That doesn't mean that all of your events must be "educational" in the strictest sense of the word.

A program doesn't have to be a traditional lecture to be a learning experience. Your programs can be a valuable part of the college experience by providing other cultural experiences.

Consider your musical concerts. For most incoming freshmen, music probably means one thing: being in a

stadium or concert hall with 10,000 other people for a rock and roll show. Your concerts should offer them other experiences, too, such as coffeehouse acts, jazz, world music and more.

The same is true of your film series. Most of your students have seen the latest blockbusters. Try offering a classic film series, with movies like "Citizen Kane," "Casablanca." How about a foreign film series with other wonderful movies that they may have never seen?

Even outdoor events, such as "outward bound-type" adventures and ropes courses, can be learning experiences. Many students will gain more self-confidence and learn more about themselves through such activities and events.

It's great to entertain students, and to help them deal with the stress of classes, papers, and exams. But it's even better to entertain students to expand their minds at the same time! Learning can be and should be fun.

"Who" to have at an event

Selecting events can be the most enjoyable and the most difficult part of your job. You will learn about so many wonderful performers and exciting events. You will meet numerous artists and agents you want to work with. You will

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read about terrific musicians and comedians, hear their CDs, see them showcase, and you'll want to book them. Unfortunately, your budget only goes so far. Here are some ways to select acts for your campus events.

First of all, consider "professional college-circuit acts." These are the acts you hear about from InfoAct, read about in Programming On The Road and Campus Activities magazines, and meet at the NACA and APCA conferences. These acts know how to perform on a college campus, they are accustomed to working in that environment, and they are always your best bet.

They perform primarily (or exclusively) for college students. They provide you with posters and other promotional materials especially tailored to the college market. You don't have to worry if they'll show up, or if they'll be stoned, or if they'll be profane or offensive. They are professionals. If they behave crassly, the word spreads very quickly through the campus activities field.

There are many professional college performers, acts, and events to choose from. Practice cultural diversity, and bring in a variety of performers-- male, female, white, Hispanic, African-American, musical, comedy, dramatic, etc. Try to

expose your students to the broad spectrum of performers that are out there.

Try to bring in new performers every year. This can be difficult if you have acts that you love, and that you have presented every year before. Students need to see other acts, too. But don't totally revamp your schedule and eliminate acts just because they performed last year. It's a fine line, but try to maintain some consistency and some freshness, too.

Consider block booking and cooperative buying of acts. Block booking and co-op buying of performances and events is based on a simple concept: it is expensive to be on the road. For example, an act could play for three different neighboring schools in three different months and make three trips to the area. Or they could play all three schools over a three-to-five day period, and only make one trip to the area. They save money, and so they give you a cheaper price.

Find out what acts are performing at your area schools, and try to fit them into your schedule. If there is a particular act that you want to book, contact other schools in your area and try to get them interested. That's how to get the best price for your performers.

But use your cooperative buying efforts wisely. You will save the most money from the most expensive acts. You may be better off paying the isolated date price for a \$1200 act and getting the date you want, instead of trying to save \$150. But for a \$12,000 act, you might consider booking the act on the best block date you can get and save \$1500. That can make a big difference in your program budget!

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