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Lessons Learned as a Faculty Advisor to a Student-Produced Event

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Abstract

The curtain dropped on April 25, 2008, concluding my third year as faculty advisor to the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing Fashion Show. This year marked perhaps our most successful event to date. Attendance increased 35 percent from the previous year and included 2,455 guests in Stephens Auditorium, filling all but the most remote corners.

Keywords

faculty advisement, communication, event planning

Disciplines

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Comments

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Sara B. Marcketti

The curtain dropped on April 25, 2008, concluding my third year as faculty advisor to the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing Fashion Show. This year marked perhaps our most successful event to date. Attendance increased 35 percent from the previous year and included 2,455 guests in Stephens Auditorium, filling all but the most remote corners.

The show featured the work of nearly 50 student designers, over 150 garments, and 40 models and was produced and promoted as part of an undergraduate course during the spring semester. The course included three student producers, 16 student directors, and 60 students on the committees of alumni and hospitality management, design, fundraising, modeling, public relations, and set-tech.

The students were responsible for finding nationally known judges for the garments entered in the show; finding an established professional designer to present the guest line; coordinating and selecting models for the show; selecting music; promoting and publicizing the event; and finding sponsors for the first-, second-, and third-place awards as decided by the judges. Students also needed to design or hire a designer to construct a professional-looking set and create an alumni event following the show. Here are the lessons I learned as faculty advisor to such a successful student-produced event.

Communication is central to the success of any event: Thirty minutes before each class, the student directors and I would meet to discuss pertinent matters related to the show production. While these meetings were beneficial to us getting on the same page regarding sponsors and potential publicity options, if our decisions did not find their way to committee members, chaos and confusion inevitably occurred.

A mailing list of all class members helped to increase communication, as did director reports at the beginning of each class. The email list and the director reports provided excellent teaching opportunities to discuss the elements of professional correspondence and communication. Several directors commented in their final class reflections that the director reports boosted their confidence in public speaking, an unintended yet positive outcome of the public reports.

Trust the trustworthy directors: During our judging day, approximately 20 percent of garments were not accepted into the show. For the models wearing these garments, that meant one less opportunity to demonstrate their hard work on the fashion show stage. When the modeling directors tried to rectify the uneven number of models wearing the majority of the garments by switching models into different garments, certain designers expressed great displeasure.

What immediately followed was a confusing and conflicting amount of information generated by me, the producers, the other directors, and even committee members about how to right the situation. Finally, after much confusion, I decided to tell all involved that ultimately the decisions were the responsibility of the modeling directors.

While this decision did not please all involved, at least there was one decision rather than 30 different opinions. In short, if we would have trusted the modeling directors to do their job that they had accomplished very well up to that point, a lot of negativity and confusion would have been avoided.

Provide opportunities for people to experiment: The class that produces the fashion show is open to sophomore-to-senior-standing students. Students self-select which

committee they would like to work within. While for the most part students state satisfaction with their chosen field, there are some students who are frustrated by their experiences.

Speaking of her fund-raising committee, a pleased student wrote in her final report, "At first, I was nervous asking strangers for money and scared of the possible rejection. When I arrived at the first business, however, I realized that it was actually quite easy, and I was much calmer than I expected I would be. After the first business sponsored an award, I was surer of myself and my confidence increased. The rest of my trips to businesses went very smoothly."

Speaking of the same fund-raising committee, another student stated, "My mom is a development director and my aunt is a president of a university foundation, so



Events That Work: Breakfast at Midnight

It may not be a direct solution to rising fuel costs, but one of Etkin's interns suggests an event sure to bring a smile to attendees' faces and keep the university in their memories: breakfast at midnight. On days when meeting events run late, consider offering breakfast served at midnight, with the tab picked up by the university or an area business that agrees to sponsor the breakfast for the publicity. The important part is not the food, but the social atmosphere that results from an unexpected break in the schedule.

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I thought the fund-raising gene ran in the family. Unfortunately, while I do have a lot of tenacity, I realized fundraising is not for me.” College is certainly the place to experiment with possible careers, and the fashion show

production and promotion class provides that opportunity.

While there are always things that I would change about either the process or the product of a semester, I do have great satisfaction that the fashion show production and promotion class allows students actual experiences with event planning. These experiences are the

starting point for reflection and growth and, indeed, true learning.

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Is Your Meeting Running Out of Gas?

Ways to Make Your Campus a More Attractive Venue in Tight Economic Times

As the final issue of *CEP* went to press, gas prices were grazing \$4.00 per gallon, airline ticket prices were skyrocketing, and airport security regulations were making travelers think twice about boarding a plane. The silver lining in this cloud? More corporations, associations, and federations are thinking about holding their meetings locally, and the nearest college or university could be the perfect venue.

ME Productions, Florida’s largest meeting and special events firm, is an award-winning full-service destination management and event production company specializing in national and international corporate and social events, decor, floral design, destination management services, business theater, staging, audiovisual, music, and entertainment. Company executives suggested ways that universities can

better present their campuses as potential venues.

Focus on Regional Meetings: Ted Boyd, event planner for ME Productions, noted that he recently worked with an institution of higher education on an event and one-third of the budget was dedicated to advertising, yielding 50 percent more attendees than could otherwise be expected. Boyd says this is a natural outgrowth of reaching out to area organizations and educating them about the campus. “Your marketing people need to go to federations and associations. They don’t realize [colleges and universities] have theaters and ballrooms,” he says.

Create an Experience: Community members often don’t know a great deal about their closest universities unless they have children

who attend those institutions, says Hal Etkin, CEO of ME Productions. Therefore, it is important that all visitors be treated to a memorable experience, which doesn’t always have to be an expensive one. Etkin polled his student interns, and they suggested using a blank outside wall as a drive-in movie site after a presentation or giving some sort of premium, such as T-shirts and books. “They liked the word free,” Etkin says, and it is likely visitors will as well.

Consider a Gas Allowance for Potential Clients: Address client concerns directly by offering a free tank of gas to attendees when their organizations book events. Local companies can be called upon to underwrite these efforts, and both those companies and the university will make a favorable impression. ■

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budgets work, students will practice reading and understanding different forms of budgets and expense reports. An in-class activity regarding their larger special event project in the community will focus on developing a list of projected expenses and a budget for their events. With knowledge about budgets and some practice prior

to the start of a career, people will be more confident and positive about the budgeting process.

A course containing hands-on activities and planning of an actual event was identified by 100 percent of those interviewed as the best way for students to learn about event management. Activities such as class discussions, job shadowing, observations, guest speakers, interviews with professional event planners, and assisting in

the planning of an event in the community will help accomplish the four main components of event planning as identified by professionals in the field.

Allyson Dierenfeld is a senior at Iowa State University. Her University Honors Project, “Developing an Introductory Event Planning Course through Scholarly Research,” was carried out with Dr. Sara Marcketti as project advisor. ■