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The Show Goes On

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Lupe Fiasco may have seemed like just another concert at Iowa State. More expensive ticket prices are what students have come to expect for bigger name acts. It’s rare to find tickets to a national headliner for under $30, putting Fiasco’s $21 or $26 ticket fee just below the expected. What most fail to realize is that Fiasco was the first Student Union Board-sponsored entertainment act ever to play at the Hilton Coliseum.
iasco was the first nationally renowned act brought to campus by SUB’s new National Events Account in its first year of existence. The $200,000 account allows SUB to bring big-name entertainment acts to Iowa State with discounted ticket prices for students and could change the future of entertainment in Ames, Iowa, forever.

**THE PHOENIX OF CAMPUSTOWN’S CYCLONE CINEMA**

The Government of the Student Body’s Cyclone Cinema project was on SUB’s radar.

Having determined a need to provide more entertainment options for students, GSB had set aside $346,000 for the renovation of the former Varsity Theater into Cyclone Cinema – a multipurpose classroom space and student-run theater.

The hype that surrounded GSB’s Cyclone Cinema project two years ago was abruptly interrupted by LANE4’s talk of Campustown renovations. An overhaul of the area and higher-than-expected costs impeded upon GSB’s plans for renovating the space.

The abandonment of the project was one that happened inaudibly, behind the public outcry that accompanied LANE4’s renovation proposals. Business owners objected that they would be forced to relocate and that LANE4 was just trying to make a profit, while the public wasn’t convinced that the area was the blight in need of revitalization that renovation discussions emphasized.

Peoples’ attention was drawn from GSB’s plan to provide students with more entertainment to the jeopardy that the Campustown area found itself in.

After already spending nearly $5,000 on architectural planning and design fees, GSB reclaimed the remaining $341,000 to their general account last March after determining it was not effective use of student fee money, according to former GSB vice president and current Speaker of the Senate Nate Dobbels.
It was then that the Student Union Board realized they had a chance to better Iowa State entertainment by doing the same work their organization already did, but on a much larger scale.

“We knew that this giant lump-sum of money existed and we knew that it had been put aside for entertainment for students,” SUB president MaryBeth Konkowski explained. With the money up for allocation, SUB members brainstormed ideas of how they could utilize the money to extend their services to meet the entertainment needs that GSB had assessed.

Bringing national touring events to Iowa State had already been the topic of discussion at meetings between GSB and SUB representatives in the fall of 2010. These representatives researched universities similar to Iowa State. How did they manage these larger events at their campuses? What kind of funding supported their programs? Ultimately these discussions led to the formation of the Alternative Entertainment Task Force, whose purpose was to come up with different ideas or help raise students’ awareness of alternative entertainment on weekends.

It seemed the most effective way for the group to provide entertainment to the largest amount of students was to bring national events to campus, utilizing venues like Hilton Coliseum and C.Y. Stephens. Former GSB vice president Nate Dobbels, worked with SUB to develop this idea and headed the Alternative Entertainment Task Force.

While SUB isn’t the only organization bringing entertainment to campus, its experience and the nature of its existing events made it the first choice for allocation of GSB funds.

“There was just a determination that SUB is really the premier event planner here on campus,” Dobbels explained. “They work directly with Student Activities Center and there was no better place to put this fund.”

WHERE THE BIG NAMES COME FROM
SUB’s National Events Account is managed with a break-even model: Each show brought to campus through the fund must be estimated to regenerate its cost through ticket sales. The break-even model is something that is new for SUB and rare among other universities the same size as Iowa State.

“A lot of schools have budgets where they just charge money just to hold the students accountable for taking a ticket, but they don’t have to make any money back, per say. And that’s how most major universities do it, but we couldn’t justify a $200,000 annual allocation for this program,” SUB adviser George Micalone explained. “Ideally we’d love that, that’s a direction we’d love to go, but right now we’re definitely excited that we have any opportunity.”

According to Micalone, SUB’s business model places them in the middle of the cost spectrum for the touring acts that SUB pursues. While clubs and club promoters get a price that has a lower guarantee with a greater chance of profit, most colleges are charged the highest dollar amount possible because they’re trying to provide entertainment rather than make money. Basically, they’re charged more so that they’re held accountable to fill the show.

“We’re in the middle, we’re trying to provide a service to students that’s discounted, but also trying to make money to break even so we can do more shows, and so we’re battling to explain this to agents and justify it to students,” Micalone said.

The task of finding these acts is the responsibility of SUB executives. The heads of each department work together to identify acts students would like to see on campus.

This process consists of a combination of determining which acts to pursue, based on a particular genre they might want, acts that are touring in the area or that are buzzing on campus. Micalone takes these names and uses connections he’s built in his ten years working in the entertainment industry to find out which acts are feasible to pursue and which aren’t.

“There are certain acts that we’ll never get because of our [break-even] model,” Micalone said, citing Daniel Tosh as an example. The comedian quotes $100,000, won’t perform in arenas and won’t allow student tickets to sell for more than $15 because he doesn’t want students to have a bad perception of him. - (In magazine, probably substitute “the comedian” with “Daniel Tosh”)

With Hilton removed from the equation, C.Y. Stephens would be the next largest venue available and nowhere near the capacity needed to make back Tosh’s fee with student tickets selling at $15 and “He won’t reduce his ticket price because he knows that there are colleges out there that will just pay for that opportunity,” Micalone explained.

WHERE LUPE CAME FROM AND WHAT HE DID FOR SUB
Throughout the summer the few SUB execs that remained in Ames got together to establish the ground rules for determining acts to bring to campus. They established a voting system, where the executive committee votes on the acts they’ve decided to pursue. The first vote narrows the group’s initial list and a final vote determines which act they will seriously go after.

With more than two-thirds support for Lupe Fiasco in their final vote, SUB decided to pursue the artist. Because he was on a national tour and between stops in Illinois and Missouri, the artist accepted SUB’s offer.

Through its eight committees, SUB puts on many events each week and also collaborates with other organizations to help put on various events each week. Considering all of the events that they produce, in the past SUB tended to lose itself in its events, promoting the events themselves without emphasizing the fact that the group put them on.

Once SUB announced that they were bringing Lupe Fiasco to campus, they saw interest in their organization increase dramatically as their numbers swelled from around 30 to over 100. Big name acts help them recruit members more than performers like hypnotists.

“[These national events are] a great way to get the buzz about SUB out there. As we’ve been promoting the show, we’re not just promoting the show, it’s how can we make sure that students know that Student Union Board is behind this whole program and making sure to make that connection,” Konkowski said.

Increased interest by the student population has caused SUB to come up with controls to make sure that volunteers have genuine interest in the organization. Occasionally, people volunteer for SUB looking for access to the artists they bring or a free ticket to the shows.
“There are so many opportunities [within SUB],” Andrew Lopez said. “I’m trying to get into entertainment and I’ve learned so much and made so many contacts, it’s insane.”

In her second term as president of SUB, Konkowski attributes the dedication of returning executives for the organization’s success this year.

“So many changes have happened and we’re just moving in such a positive direction,” Konkowski said. “Last year we were struggling to get this kind of structure and figuring out how we get these committee members involved … I feel like we’re a lot more organized and we definitely want to keep that momentum going.”

This year, SUB’s execs started out with the goal of re-branding the organization.

“SUB was still very high functioning, but it was kind of losing itself in the message,” said SUB public relations director Nakeesha Van Wyk. “The need arose because we’d get big groups to certain events and no one to [others], so we were trying to find a happy medium.”

The success that SUB has seen with its re-branding endeavors so far this year has helped it organize its various committees and come together to put on its first show with the National Events Account.

As the first act of this caliber, though, SUB did encounter some unexpected obstacles to the Lupe Fiasco concert. A number of concertgoers were frustrated when the lower level tickets they purchased did not gain them access to floor seating in front of the stage as they expected. Instead, they were confined to the first tier of seating and later joined by fans sitting in upper level. Not long before show time, SUB learned that 1,200 attendees were allowed to go on to the floor in front of the stage, a fact that was unclear to ticket purchasers, who had to decide between lower- and upper-level seating at a cost difference of five dollars.

With this in mind, the first 1,200 attendees with tickets for lower-level seating were given wristbands granting them floor access. Once that capacity was reached, problems began to arise in the form of aggravated fans who felt entitled to a spot on the still-spacious floor, which fire codes prevented packing.

Because the show wasn’t sold out and 1,200 members of the lower section were on the floor, Hilton staff then made the decision to move those in the upper level to the lower level in order to consolidate their staff and make security easier. For people with lower level tickets, like Duncan Stephens and his friends, being joined by those who paid less was aggravating.

“If you’re going to separate the tickets and the seating you have to stick to that because people made decision based on that criteria,” said Stephens, who made it clear that he didn’t blame any one party, but wasn’t happy with the handling of seating at the show.

Konkowski said that as the first SUB-produced show at Hilton, nobody was sure what to expect with floor seating.

“There are so many people involved with the planning: Hilton, Ticketmaster, SUB, Agencies, Tour Managers and the list goes on,” Konkowski said. “Sometimes information registers with some differently than others, and I believe some of that happened with this situation.”

Despite his agitation, Stephens was sympathetic to those who had to turn people away from the floor, because they were screamed at and treated disrespectfully through the beginning of the show. Police were brought in to remove some disgruntled guests. With so many people riled up from the seating fiasco, Stephens said that safety seemed a questionable reason for the seating adjustments.

“The first 45 minutes of the concert were just a massive gaggle,” Stephens said. “Stress levels were high with us, with the staff and just the stress level in the entire coliseum was high if you weren’t down on the floor.”

Stephens believes that if SUB had explained the seating options more clearly before the show, there wouldn’t have been an excuse for everyone to get so riled up.

“It’s unfortunate how it went down, but I guess I have faith in them that they’ll learn from it and fix it next time,” said Stephens, who admitted that in the end he and his friends did enjoy the concert.

Whether they choose to sell floor seating separately or advertise that the first in the door get spots on the floor, Konkowski believes that after evaluating their first show, SUB is ready to take on more, without such problems.
WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS FOR THE FUTURE

Bringing Lupe Fiasco to Hilton Coliseum was a milestone for SUB, as it was the first event the group hosted in the arena. While it was a defining moment for SUB, the event and those brought in the future have the potential to define the future of entertainment at Iowa State.

“This is the next level where students have access at a very reasonable price for entertainment that they would have to go at least 5 hours away for,” Micalone said.

By providing affordable entertainment, more students are able to attend these shows, which contributes to the overall experience students have in their time as Iowa State students.

“[It’s] such a positive way to enhance the college experience,” Dobbels said. “I think that’s the most important thing out of this National Events Account is that we’re changing the way students are thinking about the options that they have here on campus. They’re finding that … there are things that [they] can do here on campus, this is where [they] want to be and [they’re] proud to be a part of the Iowa State community.”

Along with its big name entertainment endeavors, SUB also adopted the task of improving the weekend movie showings this year, collaborating with the Inter-Residence Hall Association, which formerly ran the Free Friday Flicks program. Working with IRHA and GSB, SUB transformed 101 Carver into a movie theater, affectionately known as Cyclone Cinema, with the addition of a high-definition projector and speakers.

This partnership allows Cyclone Cinema to show movies twice a day, Thursday through Sunday, compared to the three showings per weekend in past years. The sale of concessions completes the movie theater fill, which has brought in over 800 moviegoers each weekend, according to Alec Thompson, films committee chair for SUB. Compared to the approximately 200 students in attendance on any given weekend last year, Thompson believes the permanent location and increase in showings has led to the success of the film showings this year.

“We wanted to show the films out of one location with constant showing times,” Thompson said.

This year, SUB has had to cut off admission to showings in accordance with 101 Carver’s capacity of, 202 people. Thompson says a turnout of that size is a very good sign.

“It’s just been really successful, I don’t think we could’ve imagined a more successful project coming from that initial invest,” Dobbels said. “It’s exactly what we were hoping for and in my mind it’s actually better because it’s free.”

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“The more events that we do there, the more likely outside promoters will see that it’s a viable venue and then they’ll have more activity. So they need our business to be able to generate outside business to some extent,” Micalone said.

The presence of these acts on the Iowa State campus serves the greater good of putting Ames, Iowa on the map for future entertainers planning their tours.

“Back in the day, more outside promoters used to bring more student-friendly major entertainment to Hilton and Stephens and in the last half decade they’ve just stopped for some reason,” Micalone said.

Micalone speculated that the economy, a drop in ticket sales and the management transition at Hilton to the athletics department, which doesn’t choose to bring in entertainment shows, impacted outside promoters’ interest in Ames. This lack of interest left a void for high caliber entertainment at Iowa State.

“They rely on outside promoters to bring in acts, so SUB is the promoter in this sense where we rent Hilton and present this show and all the risk is on us,” Micalone said.

“Even VEISHEA didn’t have entertainment named before 2006, so we’ve evolved as far as entertainment on campus,” Micalone said. “[In the early 2000s] the M-Shop was the most exciting thing we had as far as entertainment. And the M-Shop still brings great entertainment, just on a different scale.”

Having the ability to bring big name acts to the Ames community helps SUB define itself as an organization and prevents students from having to travel to see such popular acts.

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