

Building Campus Community by Del Suggs

Campus community is a vital part of a vibrant school. While we often think of community as meaning our city, our town, or even our neighborhood, Campus community is similar. It's that common bond that holds us together.

I think of the sense of community as that feeling of togetherness that brings us comfort. We are all alone in the world, so we strive to form bonds with others to eliminate that sense of aloneness.

Look at the world around us. Individuals come together to form families. Families extend into clans. Clans join to become tribes. Tribes form villages. Villages grow into towns. Towns expand into cities. Cities link together to create states and countries. We always seem to be reaching out and extending our bonds.

You'll find that community is so important, it's likely in your school's mission or values. That's because a sense of community is vital for productivity, for well-being, and for the overall success of the school and its citizens. A lack of community leads to social disintegration, or a break down in the traditional support systems.

Members of a society tend to feel connected, and to look out for each other. They work

together-- and separately- to promote the common good.

The same idea applies to campus community. It's that feeling of togetherness, that sense that we're "all in this together." It often results from tragedy, and you'll certainly recognize the phrase "We Are Marshall." That phrase came about following the plane crash which took so many lives, and reflects the shared loss and reaffirmation. Schools with a strong sense of community seek to reinforce it, because it leads to powerful bonds. Florida State University coined the term "Seminole Nation" to name its nation-wide community of students and alumni.

Community building begins by breaking down barriers. We have dissimilar groups of people on campus-- or they at least they *think* that they are dissimilar. Students tend to group with their peers, and these peer-groups are often based on ethnicity, age, interest, declared major, or other self-identified groups. Breaking down barriers brings these groups together. And nothing breaks down barriers on campus like student activities.

The most popular organized campus activities all serve to unite various groups of students. Dances, concerts, comedians, interactive events and programs, all of these

things bring students together and build campus community.

Reach out to faculty and staff, too. Barriers need to be broken between students, but they also need to be broken between students and faculty and staff. Consider ways to get your faculty involved with students away from the classroom. Encourage faculty to serve as advisers to clubs and organizations. Have faculty serve students at informal meal functions like cookouts and midnight study breaks.

Bring faculty and students together for charitable events. Assemble teams for walkathons, Relay for Life, Habitat for Humanity, blood drives, food drives, and any other service opportunity. These interactions help students to see faculty as more than just "talking heads" at the front of classrooms.

Campus community also means pride in your school. The Beach Boys had an early hit called "Be True To Your School," and it's a clear reflection of school pride.

If they don't exist already, create a list of shared campus values. These should be the values that all members of your campus community (students, faculty, staff, alumni, and self-identified) share. I'm talking about values such as integrity, character, service, sacrifice, diversity, unity, and more.

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These values aren't exclusive to your campus community, but are the values shared by your campus community.

Publicize and popularize your campus symbols. I don't mean your mascot or team emblem. Nearly every school has a campus symbol. Look at your school seal or logo. Is there a distinctive building (like the Bell Tower), or some other symbol? My alma mater has three torches as its symbol, each one standing for a different ideal: strength, skill, and character. Identify your symbols, and use them to help your community identify with your campus.

Promote your school colors. Schools with athletic teams often wear the school colors on "game days." Promote your school colors as a way to identify your community members. You might even declare a School Spirit Day (like you did in high school) where everyone wear school colors-- even if you don't have athletic teams.

Establish rituals and ceremonies on campus. Many schools have events like convocations, and use these to share school traditions. At the fall convocation, all new students should learn about the campus history, traditions, and even learn the school alma mater and fight song. It creates an instant bonding with your new students, and

brings them together with your existing community.

Provide public recognition for successful and distinguished alumni. The school alumni association may already be doing it, and it's a great way to keep members aware and involved with your campus community. You should also establish a means to recognize and honor faculty and students. How about a "Faculty Member of the Month" and "Student of the Month"? Present these honors on a regular basis, to keep the concept fresh and up front.

Work to create projects with a lasting value to your campus. If you attend an older, established school, you likely see these projects all around you. Often there are benches or patios or walkways with a label such as "Gift of the Class of 1988."

Organize students to contribute to such projects, and to create programs that nurture them. It doesn't always have to be an expensive building or renovation. It can be as simple as a flower garden. I've seen lovely butterfly gardens on campuses with a sign which read "maintained by the class of 2005" It could easily be maintained by this year's Senior Class, if they simply agreed to do the gardening.

Lastly, consider ways to create community and enhance the community by expanding it. One simple way is to establish scholarship programs.

Scholarships certainly help students by providing the funding they need for school. But scholarships also assist in expanding the campus community. Those who contribute to help fund a scholarship feel a bond to the campus. They obviously believe in the mission of the school, and the ability of the school to produce graduates with the qualities they admire.

A strong sense of campus community brings student, faculty, staff, and locals together. It is a bonding that produces pride and honor. Community leads to a more successful campus, as those members work to better themselves, their fellow community members, and their school.

"So be true to your school now
Just like you would to your girl
or guy.

Be true to your school now
And let your colors fly.
Be true to your school."
--Brian Wilson & Mike Love

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