

Incorporating Student Activities into Community Service **by Del Suggs**

Student activities is charged with getting all those students on your campus engaged and involved. One the best means to get students involved is through community service. Now, when you think of community service and student activities, you might first think of service learning projects. Your campus Office of Student Activities is often tagged the duties of student engagement and student leadership, and you can certainly fulfill those duties with community service events.

For example, many schools across the country participate in "Alternative Spring Break" programs that use vacationing students to work in community service projects. A number of schools sent students to the Gulf Coast to help clean up after Hurricane Katrina, and vacationing students frequently volunteer to help rehabilitate homes or work in homeless shelters.

Here's another concept: use your skills in producing entertainment programs and events to enhance and improve a community service program. You can often make an existing program even more effective by adding entertainment. Having good entertainment can amplify the program by bringing attention to the event, attracting more participants and keeping them in attendance longer.

Think about the power of entertainment to raise money. We're all familiar with the Labor Day Telethon with Jerry Lewis, and how every year it raises millions of dollars for a wonderful cause. Take that idea, and apply it locally.

Back in December, I performed for a fund-raising event for a high school scholarship fund in my hometown. We raised over \$50,000 in one night at the Holiday Gala. Of course, it wasn't just my performance that did it! Attendants were served a nice meal, had a fun program, and also had the chance to make additional donations. Still, it was the entertainment that clinched to deal and make the Holiday Gala happen.

There is great power in entertainment. Early in my career, I helped to produce a fund-raising concert for Habitat for Humanity. The money we raised at the show was the seed money which help found the Habitat chapter in Tallahassee, Florida. In the years since, the local Habitat chapter has built over 100 homes for deserving residents-- and it all began with that one concert.

But there are more ways to incorporate entertainment into your community service than just fund-raising. I've done many different service events that involved music and other entertainment to make the project successful.

At Southern Polytechnic University (GA), I performed for a Campus Blood Drive. Does that sound odd? Well, think about it. My "saltwater music" style is very laid-back, calm and peaceful (think Jack Johnson). The Student Activities Office thought it was a great way to settle the nerves of people lined up to give blood, and a good distraction for those in the process of donating. It worked, and they had a record volume of donors.

Pensacola State College (FL) had me perform for their "Rock The Vote" voter registration drive. Working in conjunction with the staff at MTV, the Student Activities Office organized a big event with a cookout, musical entertainment, and the local Supervisor of Elections there to register college students. Many students registered for the first time, and were able to participate in the next election.

Spartanburg Methodist College (SC) had me perform for their "Safe Spring Break" program. For the week before Spring Break, they did an awareness campaign about the pitfalls of that infamous school vacation. While it might be a challenge to get college students to attend a program to learn about the dangers of binge drinking and unprotected sex, they will come to hear music and enjoy a performance. SMC learned that they could distribute materials to the crowd that attended the show, and help to inform their students.

Longwood University (VA) brought me in to perform during their campus "Involvement Fair." That was their name for the program that most schools do each semester to recruit students for all the clubs and organizations on campus. Longwood had learned that having a performer at the event would draw a crowd from all over campus. Then, those students might visit the tables being staffed by club representatives. One more smart move by Lancer Productions-- they did their Involvement Fair for two days (Tuesday and Wednesday) and they held the event twice each day at Noon and at 5 PM. That way they caught students with various schedules,

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those who weren't on campus every day and those evening students who are so often overlooked.

You can also increase your student engagement at your campus Involvement Fair or Club Fair by inviting off-campus groups to participate. Some students may not be interested in the Chess Club or Nursing Student Association, but they might want to become involved with the Humane Society or the Big Brothers-Big Sisters program. Invite those worthwhile off campus groups to come and recruit, too.

Hillsborough Community College (FL) has scheduled me to perform on the day of their SGA elections. By having a musical event, and free hot dogs, they were able to attract and hold many students who normally would head to class, the library, or just leave campus. The students who were attracted to the event would log on and vote right there at the event. As you might imagine, participation in their elections skyrocketed thanks to this event.

I've mentioned Habitat for Humanity before. The local chapter will often do a "Blitz Build" where they will build an entire home in just three or four weeks. I've helped out with entertainment there, too. They have a tight schedule for a blitz build, as you might imagine. They start early, work hard, and take few breaks--but they always eat lunch. I would arrive before Noon, set up a sound system, and then sing for the workers while they ate lunch. A little music can go a long way, and even a brief thirty-minute show was appreciated. They were working hard to build a

deserving family a home, so it seemed like a great way to lift their spirits and reward their efforts.

Finally, for many years I've produced and performed for "The Almost Christmas Concerts" with my friend Pierce Pettis. It has become a big event, and we frequently sellout both nights of the show. After several years, I realized that we were missing out on an amazing opportunity to do something good with all of those people. So, the next year we asked the audience to bring a non-perishable food item to the concert for the local food bank. In the last four years, we've collected over 1,000 pounds of food! Just by inviting those already attending the show to do a simple act of kindness, we've been able to help restock the holiday pantry at the local food bank. Now that's the power of entertainment to do community service!

I hope this article will help you to discover ways to combine your entertainment programs with your community service opportunities. Think about the many ways you can add an entertainment component to your service learning to make them even more effective. And, think about ways you can add a community service component to your existing entertainment events. You can enhance both programs, increase your attendance and impact, and have even more fun. That's definitely a "win-win" situation.

If you have any questions or comments, I'd love to hear from you. Just drop me an email, and I'll get back to you.

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