Presenting a Student Leadership Conference

by
Del Suggs

One of the most important programs you can produce for your campus is a **Student Leadership Conference**.

Administrators across the country have recognized the importance of leadership development in college students, and many schools have staff responsible for leadership programs. This is another area where student activities is truly co-curricular; it's a prime opportunity for you, the programming expert, to contribute to the educational mission of the school.

Leadership programs are generally presented in one of three ways: a leadership series, featuring a weekly or monthly seminar on leadership skills; a leadership speaker, coming in to do a single presentation; and, a Leadership Conference, consisting of a number of presentations over the course of one or more days. While each of these programs has benefits, the Leadership Conference offers the most powerful focus on development while highlighting the concept of leadership on your campus.

You should understand, too, that there is no best time for a Leadership Conference. They can work very well at the beginning of the academic year as new officer training. They work equally well at mid-year to reinvigorate your leaders. Even at the end of the year, they function as advance training for those returning in the Fall. So these programs are always effective and useful for your students.

Target Your Conference

Begin your conference planning by accessing your target audience-- the students you seek to develop into leaders. Will it be just the SGA, or will it also include student leaders from other organizations? Will it be open to those students who are not currently involved in campus organizations, but have made a conscious decision to become a leader? How about local high school students-- will you also include them in your conference? Including local high school students can be a powerful community outreach for your school, and a useful recruiting tool for new students.

Considering your target audience will help you in planning some important initial logistics-- when and where to hold your conference. A conference held during the week can conflict with classes, so you may want to look at other options, such as a weekend program; an evening program; or even presenting the conference over several days to evenly spread the class conflicts. You may also want to consider school holidays such as President's Day or Veteran's Day, or holding your conference the weekend before the semester begins. If the program concept proves popular with the administration, you may even be able to arrange for classes to be canceled for your event to increase attendance.

Think about the time frame for your Leadership Conference. Will it be a full day, such as Friday from 9 am until 5 p.m.? Will it be two half-days, such as Tuesday and Wednesday from 6 p.m. until 10 p.m.? Will it be a half-day event, perhaps from 9 am until 1 p.m. on Saturday? Establishing the length of the conference will determine the number of presentations you'll have, and the time of the conference will determine the need for meal functions.

The location for your Leadership Conference may be obvious on your campus-- you may already have a conference center available. If not, then look at your campus facilities while keeping in mind your potential attendance and your program ideas. You'll need at least one room large enough to hold all your delegates. If you do smaller sessions, too, then you'll need two, three or more smaller rooms for break out sessions. If you'll be serving a meal, then you'll need to consider food services or catering-- or availability of restaurants for a quick lunch or dinner.

Program and Topic Decisions

Assess the needs of your target audience and design your program to meet those needs. If you're presenting to your SGA, you may be painfully aware of their leadership shortcomings. If they have trouble with meeting management, decision making, planning and such, then you've got a pretty clear idea of what your Leadership Conference should address.

You may be reaching out to other campus organizations, or to the entire student body. In that case, look at expanding your focus beyond simple leadership or procedural training. Not every leader needs to be trained in "Robert's Rules." Some student leaders may benefit more from personal development programs, such as balancing academics with other responsibilities. An important part of organizational leadership is personal leadership-- helping a leader to be a better person aids that student in being a more effective leader for an organization.

Presenting a Student Leadership Conference
by
Del Suggs

Professional Trainers

You may already have presenters in mind for your conference, perhaps someone you heard or know from the APCA conferences. It's always great to bring in a touring professional with experience in the college market to serve as your lead speaker. The touring college professionals know both what to say and how to say it in order to reach your students-- and that's a skill a corporate trainer may not have.

The professional speaker you bring in should be willing to do multiple presentations, such as the Keynote address plus one or more break out sessions. This will be the heart of your program, but there is more to be offered.

Reach out to your campus academic leaders-- your school president and vice presidents. Deans and other administrators can be a tremendous source for break out sessions and smaller training programs. Some faculty members are powerful speakers, and trained educators. They can develop and present some excellent programs to supplement your schedule.

And don't forget your student leaders. If you have experienced and talented student leaders, utilize them also. There is nothing like having a peer lead a breakout session. It's a powerful motivator for leaders to present the best session they can. It's also a motivator to younger students to follow the example of your good student leaders.

Remember to keep your sessions a reasonable length-- nobody wants to sit and listen for two hours without a break. As a rule, Keynotes should be about an hour, and breakout sessions should be even less.

Keys to Success

Pre-registration is important. Having a registration period well before the conference will let you know how many students will be attending. If more students sign up than you expected then you'll have time to add break out sessions, increase meal orders, find additional meeting rooms, and more. And-- if fewer people register than you plan-- you'll have time to do some recruiting!

Prepare a folder for each participant that will include the schedule of events, a description of the breakout sessions, biographical material about the presenters, and information about any upcoming events you want them to be aware of, such as ongoing leadership programs or elections. And don't forget to include a notepad and a pen. You'll be surprised at how many students will come empty handed, with no way to take notes.

Have "roundtable" discussions for each executive position, gathering organization presidents in one room, treasurers in another room, and so on. If you have experienced student leaders, this is a great opportunity for them to facilitate.

Have a "New Leaders" tract, with sessions aimed at those just taking leadership positions. Incoming officers need to know about simple things like agendas and minutes, but they may need to know about school policies and procedures. New leaders may not know where to reserve meeting rooms; if they can use outside caterers for events or if they must use the campus food service; and the other thousand little things that experienced leaders will already know.

Consider some creative breakout sessions. At a student leadership conference in Georgia, I presented a breakout session on low-cost promotion and advertising ideas. Why? Because every organization on campus needs to know how to promote their events. At another leadership conference in Mississippi I did a breakout session on programming events at a commuter campus. Why? Because campus organizations had difficulty getting attendance at their programs, and that session helped them to understand the dynamics of programming for a commuter campus. At yet another leadership conference in Ohio, I presented a personal achievement and goal setting program. Why? Because effective leaders need to be able to lead themselves before they can lead an organization.

A campus Student Leadership Conference is an excellent way to train your leaders, to reinvigorate your organizations, and to recruit future leaders. It is also a powerful tool in campus collaboration, and is a perfect opportunity for your student activities office to contribute to the educational mission of your school. Plan well, use your organizational, production, and promotional skills, and you'll have students-- and faculty-- begging for more leadership development opportunities.