

On January 14, 2008, academic event professionals from across the United States participated in AEP 2008, a forum for discussing issues that are unique to the university environment and challenges common to all professionals in the event planning industry. The conference was sponsored by Georgia State University, The University of Georgia, and The Special Event Company, and included a roundtable discussion produced by The University of Georgia during their "Team AEP" luncheon. The following is a collection of challenges, creative ideas, simple changes and lessons learned as discussed within each luncheon table's topical focus.

CHALLENGES

Signature Events

- + Keeping ideas fresh, new and exciting
- + Motivating and exciting staff
- + Balancing large invitee list with budget restrictions
- + Finding affordable advertising/marketing (develop relationships with media or corporate partners who can donate funds or staff to create media coverage)
- + Keeping children of alumni entertained at events (ask student organizations to donate child care time or art supplies and games)
- + Convincing administration and core leadership to support new ideas or try new things
- + Adding value that is acknowledged by team members, supervisors and administration

Athletics

- + Getting invitees to RSVP
- + Finding vendors that are responsive and helpful
- + Wading through university politics and bureaucracy

Alumni Relations

- + Increasing attendance at events (charging guests a nominal fee for attendance may increase their commitment to attend and get their money's worth; numbers will grow as event is repeated and word circulates)

Internal Customers

- + Event professionals are shifted to new divisions or departments with little experience or knowledge of that area
- + Difficult to develop a master calendar that accommodates all divisions/departments

- + Lack of centralized communication among all event professionals
- + Faculty rarely respond to invitations and frequently no-show
- + Predicting actual guest count to avoid leftover food
- + Working around inclement weather and other site restrictions, regulations and renovations

Donor Relations

- + Urban campuses facing challenges with space and parking arrangements can offer guests carpool incentives or shuttles from more distant parking locations
- + Hosting donors for "away" athletic events can be problematic if tickets must be purchased; IRS requirements for gifts to donors may apply
- + Disagreement between event professionals and development team members
- + Difficult to obtain buy-in from board members, development team, and departmental constituents when implementing new event ideas and techniques; can hamper creativity
- + When creative ideas are successful, little to no credit is given where due
- + Turnover in the development office can hinder consistency of vision and messaging across a campaign's lifespan
- + Lack of clear expectations with regard to event responsibilities, e.g., who is responsible for finding an event's speaker?



Contracts

- + Working with hotels that may attempt to charge you for a room they have resold – this is illegal
- + Hotels regularly oversell their inventory
- + Hotel rates fluctuate based on the season, city events, etc.
- + Student organizations can be problematic due to their lack of understanding of all the elements that go into one event as well as their lack of funding

Campaigns

- + Video not always the best medium – budget concerns and desire for a more dynamic medium
- + Deciding whether or not to host campaign events to involve alumni; important to consult development/alumni data to determine at what point most alumni begin to give
- + Length of time it takes for leadership to make decisions or give approval; often dependent on their overall interest in the event

Protocol

- + Hosting events that are not repeated annually, e.g., building dedications, as they take more time and ingenuity
- + Lack of response from invited VIPs and guests
- + Ensuring that VIPs are seated with the right people

Working with Volunteers

- + Keeping student and staff volunteers engaged
- + Lack of sufficient time to gather appropriate number of volunteers



CREATIVE IDEAS

Signature Events

- + Facilitate payroll deductions for faculty and staff to buy tickets to events
- + Provide gifts or goody bags to participants
- + Use unconventional materials for centerpieces, e.g., basketball sneakers filled with flowers for an athletic event
- + Organize a wine tasting event
- + Transform unusual venues into elegant spaces, e.g., using an airport hangar for a black tie gala; guests were given gift bags resembling suitcases, check-in resembled a ticket counter, invitations looked like airline tickets
- + Use sound and lighting elements to indicate to guests that they should end conversation, creating focus without interruption
- + Provide bonfire or fireside experience outdoors on campus complete with s'mores and warm cider
- + Save money on food: use fast food made into finger food with toothpicks
- + Use thematic elements: antique car line-up and mini burgers at a 60s-themed reception
- + Create impact through tangible and emotional elements:
 - + Plant chorus of singers to blend in among guests and have them begin singing and join together at an appointed time
 - + Guests at a cancer center fundraiser were shown a digital picture of an empty unit at the center and asked to stand in order to commit to covering the cost of one bed in that room; as each donor stood to commit, a bed was added to the digital picture displayed

Alumni Relations

- + Invite attendees of Alumni Weekend to a "food fest" on campus, showcasing fare from around the world at different stations; alumni were also invited to spend the night on campus
- + Use Facebook as a tool to interact with current students and recent alumni
- + Send invitations via text message

- + Board of Trustees and Council of Regents members were given their holiday dinner seat assignments on ornaments they selected before entering the dining room; mixed up attendees and forced them to make contact with people they did not know; colored M&Ms also used as a sorting agent

Donor Relations

- + Reach employee donors through breakfast events, which can be more casual
- + Use viral marketing to reach employee donors
- + Select a location on campus to visibly recognize donors, e.g., garden wall
- + Work through department heads and deans to encourage and increase faculty attendance
- + Create events for specific types of donors (scholarship donors have a luncheon with recipient students, but notify them if their respective student is unable to attend; facilities tour and reception for donors who contributed to a new building)
- + Involve foundation boards with donor relations
- + Ask alumni board, many of whom are donors, to assist in word-of-mouth marketing and other techniques
- + Invite donors to attend significant campus events (well-known speakers, graduation, musical/theater performances, etc.)
- + Host public concert or speaking engagement, but give donors priority seating and hold reception or dinner beforehand; introduce performer(s) or speaker to donors privately to enhance their VIP experience
- + Invite donors to an athletic event and host a pre-game reception in their honor
- + Provide donors preferred seating at university events, including athletic and performance events
- + Involve well-respected faculty by asking them to give a talk on their research to a select group of donors and then engage in a Q&A session
- + Conduct behind-the-scenes facilities tours of special places on campus (iconic tower, new locker room, backstage area at theater, etc.)
- + When raising funds for a new building, host an event on the site of the building and use architectural plans, blueprints, renderings as décor

elements; if you know the landscaping plan for the building, use those flowers and plants

- + Chancellor retirement event hosted at a ballpark under construction; guests were offered behind-the-scenes tour of the facilities and the donor's box seats and were given old-fashioned baseball cards with their photo and "stats" on the card as well as a baseball autographed by the chancellor
- + Lunch box club meetings host randomly-chosen attendees that are given lunch boxes with caricatures of the chancellor in different roles
- + Orientation theme, "UCSD Rocks," led to event décor including a graphic of the school's mascot with a boulder; event participants received rock candy

Contracts

- + Include late arrival and early arrival guarantees in hotel contracts
- + Always seek bids from multiple caterers, which encourages each bidder to develop competitive and creative concepts, and makes them more willing to negotiate
- + Investigate your on-campus transportation capabilities for shuttles



Campaigns

- + Transform a gymnasium into an elegant event space
- + Create a "Hallway of Appreciation" through which your donors and attendees walk to get to an event; line the hallway with students and band members cheering those who walk by

- + Invite a celebrity to perform following your kick-off event
- + Where a variety of launch events are taking place in multiple locations, create a “thank you” book for attendees that include photos, anecdotes and school history
- + When conducting regional events (as determined by development/alumni data), have students present and ensure VIP feel of the event by having the president (and only the president) present awards to donors at a particular level; also consider acknowledging the tour of regional events and high-level donors in a press release
- + To attract donors for an all-female institution, address the husbands and sons of present and past women of that school, “Woman of Excellence”
- + Have students, faculty, department heads and development staff write hand-written thank you cards delivered in person at the event
- + Have graphics team create images that can be reused in later projects, e.g., a rendering of a historical building on campus



- + Be sure your volunteers have appropriate breaks; if possible, allow them to enjoy the activities of the event during that time
- + Provide an area for volunteers to rest or get away from the activities
- + Where appropriate, ask volunteers to indicate their preferences for tasks or responsibilities on a first come, first serve basis
- + Design t-shirts for volunteers to wear at the event that they can then take with them
- + Ask volunteers to bring friends with them
- + Have visuals available to illustrate event space, itinerary and flow

SMALL CHANGES

Signature Events

- + Better communication
- + Adequate discussion with leadership to determine an event’s purpose, goals, and priorities
- + Responsibility shared during planning, execution and evaluation
- + Increased respect and value for team members
- + Presence at marketing and other university departments’ regular meetings for insight and input
- + Ability to find sponsors

Athletics

- + More help from additional staff members as well as campus departments
- + Ability to avoid university politics
- + Unlimited budget

Alumni Relations

- + Improved communication, within department and within greater university community
- + Solution to issues surrounding presence of alcoholic beverages and student participation
- + Online registration tools/software to replace, at least in part, printed materials
- + Bigger budgets and better marketing solutions

Protocol

- + Use arrival of new university president as an opportunity to educate the university community on the workings of the administration

Working with Volunteers

- + Give “smile coupons” to volunteers who keep a smile on their face, redeemable for a free milkshake or small gift certificate
- + Provide boxed lunches or snacks to volunteers working, but not participating in your event

Internal Customers

- + Find or create event space inside university buildings to avoid inclement weather
- + Conduct future-planning sessions to map out upcoming events
- + Increase communication between departments to get a better sense of what each is doing
- + Hold more events on-site, rather than off-site
- + Make RSVPs mandatory – how is it enforceable?

Donor Relations

- + Prioritize customer service training for staff
- + Centralize event marketing to prevent duplication or public confusion; may also avoid incorrect, or unauthorized use of the President’s name on an invitation, for example; checks and balances increase consistency and event success
- + Create an event council that involves event planners and other team members to collaborate and share ideas; develop ways to promote the value of the group
- + Develop method for sharing donor information (likes/dislikes, attendance record, etc.) between event professionals and development team
- + Advise leadership on the value of their events team attending outside events and activities to mine ideas and brainstorm solutions
- + Receive more recognition when events go well, not just when things go wrong
- + Ability to put a personal or signature touch on each event rather than repeating the same concepts again and again

Protocol

- + Have the trust of leadership to implement changes to protocol based on experience or practicality



LESSONS LEARNED

Athletics

- + Develop cross-campus relationships
- + Do not burn bridges – you never know when you will need help

Alumni Relations

- + Be ready for navigating through the politics, and often working with territorial people
- + Must have passion for the work and pride in your university to be successful
- + Doing more work on the front-end of the planning process creates a better product
- + Avoid procrastination
- + Be prepared to make a case for change when you want to implement it
- + Treat co-workers, regardless of their tenure at the university, with respect
- + Presidents are regular people, just like everyone else

Donor Relations

- + Take advantage of existing student ambassador programs, or create one (students should apply and be interviewed, should be trained on appropriate elements of etiquette, and should have direct interaction with event attendees beyond acting as door-holders)
- + Always listen to and respect donors’ wishes with regard to the style of their event, i.e., formal vs. casual, as this will put them at ease and make them feel heard
- + Always keep a few tickets or a table on reserve at events to accommodate last-minute or very recent donors and attendees
- + Know your audience; some donors may respond better to a more casual and intimate environment over a black tie gala
- + With interdepartmental events, make a list of invited donors available to everyone to keep lines of communication open and avoid surprises

- + Be friendly and team-oriented when interacting with other university offices; reputation and relationships are essential in our field
- + Create a forum through which event planning professionals on your campus can regularly interact with each other as well as discuss upcoming events and concerns with support services, e.g., campus police and parking services
- + Do not take criticism or rejection of your ideas personally
- + Millionaires are people too; they appreciate the little things and like to have fun
- + Be willing to speak up and offer ideas
- + Do not be afraid to say “no”
- + Be open to new suggestions

Contracts

- + Always review contracts very carefully to know what you are agreeing to and what liability you are accepting
- + Take notice of how your vendors treat your guests, each other, and the event facilities or site
- + Always negotiate – if catering vendors cannot lower the cost of food or beverage, see if they will add complimentary delivery, linens, coat check, or valet parking; some vendors are also able to recycle centerpieces and other décor from an earlier event
- + Ask to do a tasting of your menu to avoid surprises
- + Supply a schedule outline to your vendors and have them include it in the contract to make clear their arrival and departure expectations, especially with regard to transportation vendors
- + Work with other planners on campus to share resources and costs for back-to-back events
- + Develop student mileage program where a student organizations can staff events to earn dollars toward their own event (downfalls exist, including student attendance; volunteer coordinator is needed)

Campaigns

- + Keep volunteers engaged by hosting monthly conference calls

- + Donors want recognition
- + Manage expectations of what can and cannot be done successfully within the time and resource constraints presented

Protocol

- + Develop a no-show plan for seating and other logistics for each event
- + Be prepared for surprises – unexpected guests, speaker cancellations, etc. – and make the best of them
- + Have interpreters present for commencement

Working with Volunteers

- + Keep volunteers informed of what is expected of them
- + Feed volunteers basic information and then follow-up with details as they come together
- + Seek student volunteers to interact with alumni
- + Be sure volunteers have a way to communicate with each other as necessary during the event, e.g., radios
- + Take individuals’ strengths into account when assigning them volunteer tasks
- + Always thank volunteers for their time and effort

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