Building the perfect programming board: Is it possible? We say no. There is no recipe, for example, that tells you that you need exactly seven students, one advisor, and four faculty members on board. Students, administrators, faculty and staff and your institution have varied expectations for campus programming. Each constituency expects something different—students want fun, administrators would like to reduce alcohol consumption, faculty want programming to relate to their classrooms, and the university needs to increase retention. When you attain a healthy balance in meeting the expectations of each faction, then you have come as close as is possible to creating the “perfect” programming board. This is a grand task that requires full commitment from all sides for success.

Student programming boards come in all shapes and sizes, and it is safe to say that no two are quite alike. Some may have directors, others presidents and vice-presidents, executive chairs, or even commissioners or coordinators. Programming boards may be a branch of a student government organization, may be their own clubs or campus organizations, or may serve as part of an administrative office on campus. Some may be comprised of five or six student members; others may have as many as 30 students. But despite all these possibilities, usually these student boards have a very similar purpose—to provide educational and entertaining programming for the students on their campus.

To determine what works for your board, it is important to know that any formation is a possibility. Typically, most boards have a top-down structure—one or two students serve as overseers of a board with about five to 15 focused and specific programming committees. Schools may differ in the language they use to assign these positions. Common terms are executive director, chair, president, coordinator or executive vice president. Other schools may have an entire executive board with formal positions such as president, vice president, executive assistant, treasurer, etc. with committee chairs below them.

Once you choose the skeletal structure of your board, it is time to decide what types of programming positions are crucial for it to function. So many possibilities exist for these it may seem overwhelming at first. Frequently used committee designations are concerts, late-night/weekend programming, afternoon/lunch programming, films, special events, recreation and leisure, lectures, performing or visual arts, cultural programming, coffeehouse, annual events/traditions and family programming. Often other positions are essential to the overall functioning of the group as well, such as promotions, communications, webmaster, public relations, social director, planning and research, marketing, volunteer coordinator, tickets, security, financial assistant or campus relations. These positions may make or break the success the board experiences throughout the year.

Important Points to Consider

So now you know the numerous possibilities that exist for programming board composition—how do you decide what will work best for your school? The important thing to realize is that each programming board is different for a reason. Your board needs to consider the following points to determine what is necessary for it to function successfully:

University Culture

Understanding what is important to your campus is a good place to start. Events like Homecoming, Family Weekend or Sils & Kids Weekend may be events that always take place and would be good for a student programming board to plan.

Campus Space

The space to which you have access on campus may help determine your programming needs. Do you have some sort of coffeehouse or pub on campus? If so, a committee that programs specifically in these spaces may be ideal. How about a large auditorium or lecture hall? Maybe having a steady lecture series or bringing in well-known performers would be a good decision. Use the space you have available to guide the programming positions or committees you create.

The Surrounding Community

Where your campus is located may help in determining other crucial committees. Is your school in an urban area with lots of things to do and see close by? Creating a committee specific to experiencing your city could be a good idea. Or is your institution located in a very rural setting? A committee that arranges transportation and accommodations to nearby cities would probably be appreciated by students.

Six Elements of Success

We offer six elements we believe student leaders should consider to positively contribute to the success of their programming boards. Touching on each of these should ensure you develop an effective foundation for a year of student programming.
1. Create a Solid Volunteer Base

The depth and ability of your board will determine its level of success. There should be several levels of experience with meaningful opportunities for all students involved, from seasoned to new leaders. Your board will benefit from the knowledge and past experience of returning members, but it is important to bring in fresh perspectives and ideas from new ones. It brings a balance of thought and establishes smooth transition for upcoming years.

It is essential to form a diverse team with varying skills and competencies. Each student on the programming board should bring different strengths, such as generating ideas, tasking or cheerleading. It is necessary that each person not only be able to work with their co-chairs, committees and their advisor, but with the board as a whole.

It is also always very important to have a good representation of constituencies across your campus. There should be members of varying cultures and experiences, involvements, majors, classes, Greeks, and even housing units. Each person should be able to contribute to the larger goals of the programming board as they work toward meeting their own annual goals.

2. Provide Effective Training

Training should empower students to do the work of the organization with little ongoing instruction. They should be equipped with a thorough understanding of the organization’s mission and goals, steps of programming, communication strategies, etc. Make your training developmental and fun, but don’t move too quickly through the learning component to get to the fun. The educational component provides members with the knowledge and confidence they need to carry out their responsibilities.

Before your academic year begins, set aside a time to provide students with the tools and resources to function well within the university and the community. A retreat at the start of the year dedicates time to learn the ropes and the nuts and bolts of programming. Some topics we suggest discussing are event planning, risk management, diversity, effective communication, and different personality and leadership styles.

3. Assess Campus-wide Needs

Ascertain the programming needs and interests of your student body. It is impossible to program effectively if you do not know what your campus wants and needs. Sometimes we wonder why nobody is attending the events we plan or why we keep hearing there is nothing to do on campus. An aspect of programming that is often bypassed is assessment to discover hot topics for speakers, music trends for concerts, and entertaining recreation events.

Use various methods (surveys, focus groups, suggestion boxes) to collect solid suggestions and observe trends on your campus. If you use only one method to gather information, you will find you have limited viewpoints or have touched on only part of the information your student population can offer. For example, surveys are valuable for quantitative data, but they leave out the significance of conversations and personal contact, which is where focus groups are beneficial. We encourage a combination of methods for holistic assessment.

4. Form a Comprehensive Programming Strategy

Your programming strategy should outline the goals your board wants to accomplish in a given academic year. These goals should be based on your mission and purpose, realistic for achievement, clear and specific and measurable. Your plan should also identify the values and strategies your team will employ in meeting those goals. If you expect the board to use the programming strategy well, include the members in its formulation to give them ownership of the resulting strategic plan.

Your programming strategy will provide programmers with direction and understandable expectations for each committee and the entire board. If the plan is written thoroughly with a defining purpose, unambiguous goal statements, and an action plan on how to achieve them, you have taken a considerable step toward great accomplishments for your year. This strategy will most likely change from year to year and will probably need adjustment after each semester, so it is important to revisit it regularly to ensure that the programming board is still pursuing the strategy it helped create.
5. Maintain Motivation

Constantly provide opportunities that energize your volunteer base. Students join organizations for a variety of reasons. Some are driven by internal expectations and others by outside sources. Factors that could be driving forces of involvement include personal achievement, recognition, the actual programming itself, formation of relationships, positional advancement and personal growth.

Keeping these factors in mind, you must consider various methods of maintaining motivation. Some of your members may be motivated by activities that are enjoyable and fun, while others may need praise or a form of reward. There are members who may be motivated by the expectations of others or of themselves for achievement. And then you will have members who are truly motivated by the goals and values of the board, believing in its purpose and working toward that cause. So, know your board members and motivate them accordingly with effective rewards. Each of your members is deserving of recognition in whatever form that applies; offering it will ensure that jobs are well done in the future.

6. Adopt a Programming Calendar

Give students ample time to complete their jobs successfully and adapt to your institutional timeline. The sooner you can begin planning an event, the better. It is never too early to get the ball rolling and begin to set dates, review and finalize contracts, and work on space reservation and set-up. It is also important to take into consideration major all-campus events, university traditions and other functions that may impact your planning.

Work with your entire programming board as a whole to balance programming efforts throughout the year. To effectively utilize a programming calendar, it is necessary for each member to invest time and forethought into the upcoming year. It is fundamental to begin generating creative ideas and initiate contacts with companies and vendors early. This guarantees ample time to cover all aspects of events while preparing for the unexpected. Proactive and early planning may be a change for your board and may take some effort, but the results should be well worth it.

Stages of Programming Board Evolution

In creating a new board, it helpful to understand the stages of team evolution, behaviors and identify issues. The Team Development Model (Tuckman, 1965) gives a framework for organizational development. Each stage builds on the one before it and prepares your team for the next. Each group is unique, so there is no set amount of time your board will spend in each stage; rather, it will travel to the next level when it is ready.

Stage One: Forming

Members will likely be excited about being selected for membership in the group and will typically be very optimistic, but also anxious as they question their ability to fulfill expectations.

Stage Two: Storming

Some loss of optimism occurs as team members begin to realize the tasks is different and more difficult than they had originally imagined. They may begin to disagree over what course of action the team should take while relying on personal experience rather than collaboration. Much of the team’s energy may be applied toward conflict resolution.

Stage Three: Norming

Cooperation replaces conflict, and the team forms basic “ground rules” for membership while accepting the individuality of each member. More energy is spent on accomplishing common goals.

Stage Four: Performing

Team members have discovered each other’s strengths and weaknesses and have learned what their roles are. They are satisfied with the progress and have formed an attachment to the team.

A Meaningful and Dynamic Team

In order for a team to progress productively through the above stages and further develop, student leaders must be proactive and committed to the purpose of their programming board. The more successful a team is in each stage, the higher the level of team effectiveness. The Team Effectiveness Model (Michalak, Fisch and Meeker, 1994) provides several components that are needed to form a meaningful and dynamic team.
Six Elements of Success for Programming Boards

- Create a solid volunteer base.
- Provide effective training.
- Assess campus-wide needs.
- Form a comprehensive programming strategy.
- Maintain motivation.
- Adopt a programming calendar.

Does your team have **direction**? The programming board needs to be clear about its mission, goals, strategies and visions that have been collectively identified.

Does your team have quality **leadership**? The team leader must use adaptable leadership styles to relate to the diversity of membership. They must also allocate time to improving teamwork and appropriately share leadership duties.

What is the **atmosphere** of your team? It must develop an atmosphere where feedback is valued and members feel supported, accepted and trusted.

Is the **structure** appropriate and are necessary **resources** provided? The roles and responsibilities of team members need to be clearly defined and the group’s goals must not be restricted. Team members must also be provided with the essential tools to complete their jobs.

What are the **processes** utilized within your team? Are they effective? Communication and decision-making within your team is a two-way process, with accurate expression of ideas and feelings and conflicts and controversy being resolved through discussion.

**One Size Does NOT Fit All**

There is not an ideal programming board structure we can confidently say will work for everyone. Numerous factors play into the structure and function that will be right for your team. It is important to consider the culture of your campus, including your student body, administration, faculty and staff. To use your board’s time, energy and money effectively, create a game plan to guide you through the year, complete with purpose, goals and strategies. Things may not always go as expected, so it is crucial to revisit your plan of action regularly and adjust it when needed.

Remember, it is beneficial to be flexible in leadership and open to changes from year to year. While there is no set guide on how to build a “perfect” programming board, it is possible to create a team that is just right for your campus.

**References**


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**According to Michalak, Fischer and Meeker, meaningful, dynamic teams have:**

- **Direction**;
- **Quality leadership**;
- An atmosphere where feedback is valued and members feel supported;
- Appropriate structure and necessary resources; and
- Effective processes in place that facilitate communication and decision-making.