Comedians, Lecturers and Hypnotists: Tips for Bringing These Popular Performers to Campus

By Ginny Adair

Are you responsible for planning non-musical events on your campus? While detailed planning is required for all activities, some people consider lecturers, hypnotists and comedians to be easier to arrange than musical events. This is not necessarily true, as there are specifics to each kind of entertainment that require your complete attention if they are to run smoothly.

Common Elements

As with any event, planning several months in advance for performances by comedians, lecturers and hypnotists will give you enough time to fully prepare. Here are some suggestions to help you plan well for just about any non-musical performer.

First, decide which artist you’d like to bring to campus. Work closely with their agent to schedule the performance date, time and location. Of course, you need to make sure your campus has the facilities necessary to host the performer on the date and time you’ve chosen.

While working with the agent, make sure you learn if the artist has any special technical requirements. This information is very helpful when working with your reservations office on campus. If your campus cannot provide the technical equipment needed, you will need to arrange for it to be brought in. The agent will send you a contract and a technical rider. Carefully examine all the details in these documents to make sure you meet all requirements. Don’t forget to request the usual microphone, sound system and lights, if that’s what the contract specifies, but also be sure you can accommodate any props the artist requires if they are not furnishing them.

After securing the location and working out contractual details, devise different ways to promote the event. Since you’re not dealing with musical performers, you might need to take an unusual approach to publicity. After all, you can’t stick a demo CD into a player in a common area where everyone can hear it as they pass by. Of course, you will want to employ the usual publicity methods, such as flyers, posters, announcements in the school newspaper and billboards. If your program board has a Web site, be sure to promote it there, as well. If your event has a theme, consider purchasing inexpensive novelties to distribute with information about the event imprinted on or attached to them. Be sure to employ a committee in the promotion of the event—you will need assistance in creating and implementing publicity. Besides, groups tend to become synergistic and some really great ideas might emerge from your committee.

Promotional efforts should be implemented at least one to two weeks in advance if you want a really good crowd. You also might ask your artist to offer a teaser in a common area at noon on the day of the performance. This gives students a taste of what they can see later in the evening.

Comedians

Although comedians usually do not require more than lights and a sound system, programs in which they are featured can require some special attention. Here are some considerations to keep in mind when bringing comedians to campus.
Do you want to schedule only one or several comedians during the semester?

You may have a specific event when you want to book a single comedian. For example, during a welcome week, a comedian can be great for helping kick things off. But there are other times when you might consider booking several comedians for a comedy series. Series performances need to be held consistently at the same time every week, every other week or each month.

Developing a comedy series can help you be more efficient with publicity if you plan far enough in advance. Materials can be implemented for the entire series, rather than for isolated artists.

Implementing a comedy series can also show your audiences they can rely on your program board for quality entertainment. For example, every other Thursday at 7 pm in the campus auditorium there will be a performance by a skilled comedian. Soon, students will include your series events into their schedules.

Are you staging a special comedy show?

If you are planning a one-time event that highlights a special week of activities (like Homecoming, Family Weekend, Week of Welcome, etc.), you may want to consider booking several comedians as part of a special, wrap-up event. Such a program serves as a great opportunity to bring in comedy headliners people might know from TV. If you do bring in a well-known comedian, be sure to book a lesser known, but equally good, comic to serve as a warm-up act.

Since this type of show is special and may include several entertainers, it is likely to be more expensive and will require an additional emphasis on publicity and promotion. If you spend more money in producing a show, you certainly want to be sure you have an audience for it.

What type of promotion should you implement?

No matter what you include in your publicity plan, be sure to go beyond 8-1/2" x 11" flyers. Agents send you artist photos for a reason—so students on campus will be able to put a face with a name. Your students might have seen your scheduled performer on Comedy Central or network late-night television, so help your audience make the connection that someone they’ve seen on screen is coming to your campus. Use images supplied by agents in posters and on your Web site (with appropriate permission). Also, ask the agent for a video containing samples of the comedian’s routines and verify whether you can play it in a common area on campus as a teaser for the show.

Will their content be appropriate?

Many times on college campuses, we face the dilemma of determining what is and isn’t offensive. The content of comedians’ routines can range from G to NC-17. Depending on your campus climate, you will need to determine if a particular comedian’s material is suitable for your school. Be sure to include your advisor in this discussion because they will have more experience with the campus community and will have a better idea of what is acceptable.

Depending on who you expect to be in your audience, you may want to have a discussion with the agent prior to the comedian arriving about the type of audience you anticipate. For example, you wouldn’t want a comedian to use adult material at a Family Weekend event due to the varying ages in the audience. Many comedians are willing to adjust content depending on the audience. Keep in mind, too, that you can negotiate content when you are working out contractual details with the performer and their agent.

When it comes to any performance by a comedian, if you expect the comedian’s material to offend some people, include an advisory pertaining to “Adult Content” on your publicity materials. The University of North Carolina-Charlotte includes

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Bringing comedians, lecturers and hypnotists to campus can be fun and challenging. Each kind of performer comes with its own special considerations that require planning and forethought on the part of your programming board.

How will you attract a large crowd?

Unfortunately, it can be the case that a lecturer is a more worthy presenter than the size of the audience might indicate. Therefore, work to create a buzz about your upcoming lecturer—go the extra mile in preparing publicity. Many artists keep lists of ideas for publicity that other schools have used to successfully attract audiences for them—ask for this information and use the ideas in your own efforts. Set up a large visual display in the center of campus to get attention. Ask faculty to give extra credit for attendance. Faculty are usually willing to do this when they understand the educational value your lecturer offers.

Another way to ensure a larger crowd involves something you can do before you even decide which lecturer to book. Ask students what topics interest them—politics, Hollywood, history, global issues, etc. It might seem obvious, but giving people what they ask for can be effective in attracting a larger crowd.

What type of set-up will the speaker need?

Depending on the topic, lecturers usually have a smaller technical richer than other performers. However, many lecturers now request that you provide an LCD projector with a screen. Sometimes they will also ask for a computer, although many bring their own. In addition to such equipment, some lecturers ask you for other things. For example, they might ask you to make copies for them, distribute items to assist in audience participation, or provide them with information about your college or university. It depends on the speaker, so be sure to find out what they need from you well in advance.
● Should you host a lecture series?
If there are a number of hot topics that interest people on your campus, you might want to host a lecture series. If your program board would like to add discussion to the campus agenda, that is another reason to host a series. In fact, there are a number of reasons to consider a lectures series, which can be very appealing, especially to students who love the intellectual stimulation these programs can provide. Students will also look to these programs as a great way to build community by sparking conversation among members of the campus community. Faculty are more likely to be more supportive of these events after you’ve established a reputation for excellence.

For a lecture series to be successful, however, it doesn’t necessarily have to focus on controversial topics—fun topics can work, too. As with the comedy series, be consistent with times and locations. Your publicity should make it clear that each lecture is a part of a larger series.

Hypnotists

At many schools, hypnotists may be offered as a large-scale, once-a-semester program. But when you do these programs well, they tend to be memorable with the whole campus talking about them for months afterwards. While there are a number of talented, high-profile hypnotists performing in the college market, this kind of show is not necessarily about the artist—it is often more about the students on your campus. Students love to participate in such shows, as well as see their peers on stage in the unusual and/or fun settings that hypnotists can provide. Therefore, turnout is likely to be larger than for other events on your schedule and there are some special considerations to keep in mind when bringing hypnotists to campus.

● What type of set-up is usually involved?
Depending on the particular hypnotist, you will need a certain number of chairs on a large stage. The reason for a large stage is so participants have plenty of room to “perform.” Work with the hypnotist to determine space and arrangement of chairs and don’t forget to include a microphone, lights and a sound system, as well.

● Does the hypnotist have unusual prop requests?
Be sure to review the technical rider thoroughly long before the hypnotist arrives. This will give you plenty of time to arrange any special requests the hypnotist makes. Usually, the hypnotist will bring their own props when they need unusual ones. However, if you are contractually responsible for providing a certain prop, be sure to get it. If you don’t, you are not only failing to meet your contractual obligations to the artist, you might also be preventing the hypnotist from performing part of their routine.

● How do you control a potential rush to the stage when the hypnotist asks for volunteers?
When the hypnotist asks for volunteers, there may be a rush to the stage as eager participants come forward. To keep this from becoming a problem, speak with the hypnotist before the show. The hypnotist actually has quite a bit of control in these circumstances. When they ask for volunteers, they can remind people to use caution in coming to the stage so that they don’t hurt anyone in the process, including themselves. Also, have members of the program board stationed along the edges of the stage and near the stairs to help maintain order and assist volunteers in accessing the stage. They will need to remain in place until everyone is safely on stage.

Final Touches

Bringing comedians, lecturers and hypnotists to campus can be fun and challenging. Each kind of performer comes with its own special considerations that require planning and forethought on the part of your programming board. Nevertheless, following the suggestions above for each type of performer, as well as working with your advisor and the performer’s agent to ensure all details are taken care of, will help ensure the success of your show.

After the show is over, be sure to properly thank the artist for their performance. Take them to dinner or provide a gift as a remembrance of your school and the time they spent on your campus. These touches, although seemingly small, will help you stand out among other colleges and universities and will encourage the artist to perform at your school again.

About the Author

Ginny Adair is assistant director of Student Activities for Multicultural Clubs & Organizations at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Previously, she served as assistant director of Student Activities-Programs at UNC-Charlotte and was a graduate assistant in student activities at the University of South Carolina-Aiken. She holds a bachelor’s degree in math and music from Agnes Scott College (GA) and a master’s degree in student personnel services from the University of South Carolina. In NACA, she is currently serving as the regional business manager for NACA South. She has also served as the NACA South volunteer coordinator and was named the NACA South Outstanding New Professional.

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