The recruitment fair is over. Your organization has transitioned its leadership and the old members have been placed in their new positions within the committee. The calendar for the upcoming semester is set and everyone is excited about another great season of programming. Things are, seemingly, off to a great start. However, halfway through the semester you begin hearing complaints from members of the organization: "I am sick of this," "this is more than I bargained for," "but this isn't the way we did things before." The annual retreat was a huge success and the budget is finally balanced but, oxymoronically, committee members, perhaps even the organization's leadership, are getting tired and frustrated. This is a problem, one that can prove to be detrimental to everyone involved. Ultimately, the student body will suffer because the attitudes shared by the programmers will be reflected in the programs they deliver; an apathetic and exasperated activities board will struggle to produce an enjoyable program.
Students are all-too-familiar with the “mid-term massacre,” which is produced by a culmination of heavy coursework, exams, and the inevitable struggles that every activities board faces. Mid-semester fatigue is common and, in many respects, a natural result of running in every direction. Therefore, it’s important to encourage involved students to proactively implement strategies to prevent members from “loosing fuel halfway through the race.” Too often organizations suffer from the missing “R” syndrome—placing a strong emphasis on recruitment and practically ignoring retention. Granted, recruitment is great to get new members and boost your organization’s membership count. It should be noted that retention is just as important as recruitment, if not more. Remember, your most productive programming lies in the near future. Implementation of the motivational methods discussed here will assist you in getting the most out of members and achieving ultimate programming power.

Getting Back to the Basics

Review Board Structure

A great starting point in the quest to keep yourself and other members motivated is the organizational structure of your activities board. It is not uncommon for organizations and committees to select membership or personnel directors whose responsibilities may include oversight of recruitment activities and planning social events for the members of the organization. This position is very important in any organization and proves to be beneficial. Unfortunately, in addition to serving a crucial role in the well-being of the organization, the position is often misused and, as a result, counterproductive. Although the person filling the role may do a great job, it is unfair to rely on them to keep the entire organization motivated. They can’t do everything and will experience burnout very quickly if they try.

Programming is a complex responsibility that results in program boards that vary in organization and structure. For example, there are many ways to structure an entertainment committee. It is advantageous for each academic institution to find what organizational schematic works best on their campus. Although significant differences exist, most programming boards conform to a flowchart that places a president at the top with other members under the supervision of the president. Some programming units have an executive board, general membership or a combination of both. Despite the many ways your organization could be set-up, the flowchart probably resembles an isosceles triangle with a single position at the very top (usually reserved for a president or chairperson), and additional positions becoming available as one moves down the flowchart. In short, there are more members at the bottom of the flowchart than there are at the top.

Avoid Making Leadership Responsible for All Retention, Motivation

Relying on the organization’s leadership for all retention and motivation efforts will eventually present serious issues for the organization. It should be obvious that the higher the position, the greater the responsibility and workload. Prior to examining a methodology aimed at decreasing the likelihood of delegating all motivation efforts to one person or a small group of people, the detrimental consequences of poor delegation should be outlined as clear indicators of an unsuccessful retention strategy. Put another way, if you detect cumulative disassociation and discontentment among members of your organization, you might want to take a long, hard look at the methods used for motivating members.

Before we go any further I must pause to offer a word of advice for paranoid readers! Above all, programmers, and leaders in general, are students who get tired, have tremendous pressure as a result of academic rigor, and are extremely hard workers. If a member of your committee or organization comes to a meeting tired or seemingly apathetic, don’t restructure the way you handle membership and personnel! These methods are for noticeable and repeated situations. We’ll discuss how to keep members motivated despite the mundane daily tasks that every student must endure.

Dianne Vaughn, author of Uncoupling, introduces the term “cumulative disassociation” to describe a phenomenon that is quite common on college campuses, which often begins with discontentment among members. They begin to feel disconnected from the organization and, as a result, are unhappy and hard to please: “why do we have to meet so late?”, “why does our meeting run so long?”, “I am fed up with the way things are going.” These statements are characteristic of a growing discontentment that will inevitably result in members growing apart from the organization. They’ll attend fewer meetings, show up late to programs and fail to complete required work on time.
Resolve Discontentment Immediately

To avoid the nasty consequences of cumulative disassociation, it is important to resolve discontentment as soon as it appears. Thus, it is important to familiarize yourself with the characteristics of discontentment in an attempt to prevent it from destroying the morale of members. Imagine if doctors studied only how to prevent illnesses and completely ignored how to handle infected patients. We know it is only natural to get ill occasionally, even if it’s just a case of the common cold. Although preventative medicine has allowed us to avoid a number of serious ailments, it is unrealistic to imagine a doctor without a cure for pneumonia. It is important to spend significant energy preventing situations from occurring and also necessary to prepare for when situations present themselves; some things you just can’t avoid.

Using the Bottom-Up Method

Learn Members’ Strengths and Weaknesses

Since the organizational models often have more members at the general level than at the executive level, use this structure to your advantage when motivating members. The bottom-up method recognizes that every member has innate value. It is the role of leaders to recognize the value in each member. Knowing your members’ strengths and weaknesses will go a long way in keeping them motivated, connected, and involved. Joel Osteen illustrates innate value this way; suppose that I pulled out a hundred dollar bill and offered it to you. You’d more than likely accept it! If I pulled out a hundred dollar bill, rolled it in my hand, and stepped on it you’d probably still accept it. A one hundred dollar bill has innate value that cannot be destroyed. The same is true of your members. They have innate value that can contribute much to the organization. In keeping members motivated, it is important to employ their strengths when delegating responsibilities. You must establish member motivation as a responsibility that everyone shares; it is fundamental to maintaining an enthusiastic organization.

There are many methods for determining the interests, strengths and weaknesses of others. Many organizations use formal diagnostic mechanisms to determine where their members shine. Strengths Quest and Meyers Briggs are popular tests that boast the ability to find out what you’re really good at doing. While these programs can provide useful information, they can easily consume a significant portion of your budget and, unfortunately, most organizations can afford to host such trainings only once or twice a year. The good news is that there are countless other ways you can assess your members’ strengths and interests that are both inexpensive and entertaining.

Create a Positive Atmosphere

Try starting your next meeting by asking members if they prefer Pepsi or Coke products. This informal survey will break the ice and will probably lead to a fun, light-hearted dialogue. Make sure the results are recorded in the meeting minutes. This simple exercise will create a positive atmosphere that will get your meeting off to a great start. Additionally, the information you gather will help in keeping members connected and motivated. When a member seems to be having a bad day or takes a huge test, pay a visit to your school’s dining center or convenience store and get them a bottle of their preferred drink. Secretly place it in their mailbox and literally watch their whole day turn around.

Remember, doing something positive will not only keep others motivated and connected, but it is often refreshing for you as well. Although this may seem small, and perhaps a bit trivial, adding little thoughts of expression into your member motivation technique will prove fruitful over the course of the semester. Motivation is actually a constant, subtle reminder that members are needed, appreciated and belong to the organization.

Have Fun

In your efforts to motivate others it is important that you remember to have fun. New business agendas and task lists will always demand attention. The good news is that the student union isn’t going anywhere (at least we hope)! Don’t allow the work of programming hinder you and your members from having fun. The sour taste of lemons can make almost anyone frown but they can also make a refreshing glass of lemonade! As a leader, you must decide if those lemons are going to run away all of your members or if you will use them to make lemonade that keeps their passion for programming refreshed and catches the attention of others not yet involved.
Young Enthusiasm and Old Wisdom: Beating the “But” that Comes with Programming Experience

Balance Idealism and Cynicism

Freshmen and younger students are often enthusiastic after deciding to get involved. Their ideas seem endless! They want to have drive-in movies, lock-ins in the student union and homecoming dances at midnight under the stars outside the library. The problem is that such ideas are often met with the harsh and rejecting “but” controlled by the programming veterans.

“That’s a great idea, but we can’t have a drive-in movie because not that many students have cars.”

“You suggestion sounds good, but having a dance at midnight will not attract a large number of students and it will be a waste of time.”

As a result, members begin to feel their ideas do not matter. After a while, you may notice they become unusually quiet in meetings, hesitant to participate in social events, and will eventually grow disconnected with the organization.

Acknowledge Both Dynamics

To preserve young enthusiasm and utilize the knowledge of experienced leaders, it is imperative to first acknowledge that both dynamics exist. If you are hungry and have only a few slices of bread, some peanut butter and a jar of grape jelly, you wouldn’t dare pass the opportunity to make a great peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Encourage all members to brainstorm at appropriate times, mutually decide on which programs the organization is going to pursue, determine the obstacles and encourage everyone to participate in the solutions.

Of course it’s impossible to anticipate all the challenges a program will bring. However, acting proactively will allow for a great program, free up resources that can be used on bigger challenges, and keep everyone connected and motivated.

Also Remember that Retention and Motivation Go Hand-in-Hand

Member retention goes hand-in-hand with motivation. After recruiting members, it is also important to keep them connected to the group. Using the bottom-up method will ensure that everyone participates in keeping members motivated and excited rather than leaving this important task to a single member of the organization. Remember that anything worthwhile will present its share of positives and negatives. Programming is certainly no different.

Keeping others, and yourself, motivated can be quite the task if that’s how you think of it. However, programming is also an outlet from the rigors of academia. Building friendships and hosting great events is priceless and it is a privilege to be involved. You have the skills that are necessary for keeping you and those around you motivated. Go forth and program!

References


About the Author

Darion Page is chair of the Redbird Diversity Committee at Illinois State University, where he previously served as president of the University Program Board. He also currently serves as a student specialist in the Dean of Students Office. In 2005, he earned the school’s Outstanding Student Leader Award. He graduates this year with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy. In NACA, he presented an educational session at the 2005 NACA Midwest America Regional Conference titled “Programming Power: Getting the Most Out of Your Members.” His second article for Campus Activities Program...