Get with the Program:
Enriching Education through Co-curricular Programming
at a Community College or Regional Commuter Campus

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Quality educational programming at a regional commuter campus with a limited budget is a difficult but not insurmountable challenge. It can be an extremely rewarding and worthwhile experience for students, faculty and area community members. The mission of campus activities programming at a commuter campus should be to offer a variety of presentations and events that introduce students to people of diverse backgrounds and talents, as well as to increase student awareness of a variety of social issues. As a result of such programming, an engaging educational experience is created for students, staff, faculty and members of the local community. Bringing presenters into the classroom, or in-classroom programming, gives students the opportunity to experience real-life application of the material taught and discussed in class and can significantly enhance students’ learning experience.
On residential college campuses, exposure to diversity and social issues occurs more naturally for students than at commuter colleges through formal and informal activities within the residence halls. An essential component of the college experience is meeting and learning about people and life situations that are different from one’s own. Living with people from divergent backgrounds and facing life’s daily challenges and celebrations within this residential community is an integral part of the learning community and educational experience for residential college students and staff.

Commuter campuses, especially those in rural areas, pose a unique challenge to providing the exposure to diversity and social issues that is so essential to a comprehensive education. Bowling Green State University–Firelands College (OH) has created engaging and effective campus programs that provide the learning community with a wide array of enriching experiences. These programs reinforce students by providing presenters who have “real-life” experience with a variety of academic topics. An important indicator of the significant impact of in-classroom programming is student response to the presenters and the information they presented. Student response can be given in written or verbal reaction to the program, response to guiding questions, student journals, and/or program satisfaction surveys.

Guiding Questions

Students in the spring 2004 WS 200: Introduction to Women’s Studies course were asked to respond anonymously to the following questions. In-class time was used for students to write responses, which were then turned in to the instructor. Students were assured the instructor would not read the responses until the end of the semester after course grades had been submitted.

- Are you able to identify a relationship between the content of the program presented in class and the overall course content? If so, what is that relationship?
- Did the program expose you to any new ideas? What ideas? In what ways were you impacted by that exposure?
- As the programs sometimes interrupted the overall flow of the course, were the programs ever a distraction from the course? Did they make the course seem disjointed to you?

One student wrote in response to a speaker, “It is one thing to discuss things in class, but another to witness first-hand the speakers’ experiences and emotional triumphs for them.” Another student’s comments exemplify the importance of classroom programming to her involvement in the coursework: “I feel that the speakers are a great idea. It is nice to have a life experience or a reinforcement of some kind when discussing these things in class.”

Programming Crucial to Academic Experience

About Our Students

Bowling Green State University–Firelands College is a regional commuter campus of a state university. The following data, which helps define our campus, is based upon numbers gathered in February 2004 by our Office of Institutional Research. The average age of Firelands’ students is 26.8 years. Of the 1,822 students enrolled in the 2003–2004 academic year, 49.2% were full-time students and 50.8% attended college part-time.

Firelands College is located in a rural area in Northern Ohio, one hour from the Bowling Green State University main campus, and is the University’s only regional campus. The campus is located approximately one hour from Cleveland and an hour and a half from Toledo. The ethnic diversity of the student population closely reflects that of the region we serve: 86.5% Caucasian; 6.1% African-American; 3.0% Hispanic; 0.4% Asian/Pacific Islander; 0.3% American Indian; 3.3% unknown.

Our students attend the College for a variety of reasons, including the pursuit of one of 14 associate’s degrees, the first two years of a two-plus-two program, one of eight baccalaureate degrees, for personal enrichment, or to earn one of two master’s degrees (cohort groups of main campus programs attend classes at Firelands).

Many of our students work full-time or part-time, have children and spouses/life partners and other life demands that require careful scheduling. Students tend not to stay on campus for long periods. They come for class or class-related endeavors, such as computer or science labs, the library, or the teaching and learning center, and then leave when class work is completed. These demographics make academic and extracurricular programming quite challenging.

Program Collaboration and Funding

The Office of Student and Campus Activities and the faculty and staff of Firelands College collaborate to provide a diverse schedule of presentations and events. The coordinator of Student and Campus Activities at Firelands has worked diligently to assist faculty in identifying presenters and events that coincide with and enrich the content of the classroom curriculum.

Campus-wide programming is funded from three primary sources: student general fees (which account for the majority of programming funding), the
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Humanities Department programming budget line and the Dean's Office. On occasion, outside sponsors and resources, such as our community hospital or the County Prosecutor's Victims' Assistance Program, serve as co-sponsors. These co-sponsorships enable the College to bring in more costly programs and encourage students to see the connections between what we do on campus and what is happening in the surrounding community.

One such collaboration, bringing in Dr. Sandra Steinbrugger, author of the 2002 All College Book, Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood, provided a capstone experience to an annual series of programs. For the past five years, faculty and staff at the College have organized a program called The All College Book to gather students, faculty and staff across curricula and divisions to engage in discussion of a particular book. Books have been chosen based on the reading level of the text (as they must be accessible to students in a remedial reading course), the ability of the themes of the book to prompt critical discourse, and the ability of the book to expose students to new ideas and experiences.

The All College Book series exemplifies four reasons why programming is crucial to the total academic experience:

1. In-classroom programming exposes students to diversity of culture, ideas, and life experiences;
2. In-classroom programming enhances students' critical thinking skills by addressing social issues;
3. In-classroom programming enhances classroom learning by making the curriculum "come alive" via real-life presenters with real-life application of the academic material; and
4. In-classroom programming promotes the College by attracting and including community members in campus life.

Exposure to Diversity Essential

In addition to providing the skill base and content of our disciplines, it is also the responsibility of faculty to expose college students to a vast array of thought and experience in order to prepare them for the diverse world they will encounter beyond graduation. While more and more students seem to arrive at college focused only on the requirements of a specific major that will lead to a particular career (and this phenomenon is especially true on a campus that offers a number of associate degrees in health and technology related fields), it continues to be the job of the college professor to challenge the student to expand their world view and assess their relationship to and responsibility for the world.

First Encounters

It is not uncommon for our students to experience their first encounter with diversity when they reach the Firelands' campus. Many come from small communities in which the population is predominantly Caucasian. Additionally, they are aware of little in the way of socio-economic diversity. While from town to town, there are vast differences in socio-economic status, within each of the smaller towns, there seems to be little awareness of differences or their impact.

Once a student has been on campus for a semester or more, they often talk openly about the lack of exposure they experienced before attending college. Many seem to be eager for that exposure and to recognize what its absence has meant in their development of critical thinking and world view.

As one student said, "Everything I learned from the speakers was new information and information that needed to be known." Another in the same class wrote, "It makes me feel glad to know about issues I didn't know before, after all knowledge no matter what knowledge it is, is power." These students reflect the thinking and sentiments of many of their classmates.

Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills by Addressing Social Issues

The BGSU Undergraduate: policies/programs/courses (2003–2004) identifies the characteristics of a liberally educated person as one who demonstrates "ethical integrity, reflective thinking, and social responsibility." Toward this end, the university requires a series of general education courses in the areas of natural sciences, social and behavioral sciences, arts and humanities, and cultural diversity in the United States. The learning outcomes expected for all general education classes at the university are to: "communicate effectively by gaining proficiency in reading, writing and presenting; think critically through investigating and creative problem solving; participate effectively and
lead through active engagement with diverse groups and teams of individuals."

In-classroom programming invites and challenges students to work toward the goal of becoming a "liberally educated person" by enhancing students' critical thinking skills via addressing social issues.

An excellent example of an in-classroom presenter who introduced students to an important social issue is Robert Salem, an instructor for a College of Law legal clinic and a director of the Human Rights Project, who has guest-lectured in WS 200: Introduction to Women's Studies for the past three years. The focus of his presentation differs each semester and is guided by the most current issues of gay and lesbian rights. His program offers one way for the women's studies students to understand how institutions, such as education, the church and the judicial system, impact personal lives.

In response to his Spring 2004 program, one student wrote, "...a month ago I found out that my step-brother was gay. So Rob Salem was interesting and enhanced my knowledge of gays and lesbians. It gives me a better understanding of homosexuality."

Another student responded to Salem's program by writing, "I had heard about DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act] but never really knew what it was about. Rob enlightened me and gave the class the opportunity to learn about something going on in our world. I heard a few days ago about the President's proposal for an Amendment to the Constitution, which Rob talked about, so I already had an understanding of it; I found it very helpful."

For both of these students, the program strengthened their ability to think critically about an issue they have confronted out of class. It is a constant challenge faced by teachers at all levels to bridge the world inside the classroom with the outside world. This type of in-classroom programming facilitates the continuum of critical thinking skills necessary for students to make the connection between the academic material and the "real world" in which they live and work.

Making the Curriculum "Come Alive" Via Real-life Presenters

In-class programs, those designed around and scheduled during a specific course, bring a depth to the course to which students respond. A comment such as this is typical following an in-class program: "After his [Rob Salem's] visit I wanted to know more and I continued to pay attention to what was going on ... he helped make all the issues more real to me. What I mean is, when you learn things in a classroom from your teacher, it just doesn't hit you the way it does with a speaker who specializes in that particular subject."

Program-Curriculum Alignment

At Firelands, the coordinator of Student and Campus Activities makes a concerted effort to work with faculty to align programs with curriculum. This process begins by asking faculty and staff to offer suggestions for programming and ends with seeking and finding a course and a faculty member to team up with a particular program. Because the coordinator is an educator, she has a keen awareness of the curricular content of the courses at Firelands. During the 2003-2004 academic year, programs were offered in conjunction with the following courses: Women's Studies, Introduction to the Humanities (Music and Dance), Spanish (Music and Culture), Native American Literature, American Culture Studies, Cultural Pluralism in the United States, Organization and Administration of Education in American Society, Education in a Pluralistic Society, Women's Literature, Introduction to Ethnic Studies and Minority Groups, Children's Literature and Storytelling, and Early Childhood Education.

Collaboration and Coordination

Creating truly effective in-class programming on our campus requires collaboration with and coordination between the professor of the course, the Student and Campus Activities coordinator, and, in some cases, other faculty and departments. It also requires the instructor of the course to use class time to prepare students prior to a presentation and to follow up with classroom activities afterward in order for students to gain the most from the programming experience. The WS 200: Introduction to Women's Studies lends itself well to making the curriculum "come alive" via guest speakers and presenters. It fulfills the BGSU cultural diversity requirement that examines diversity within the United States. The course content includes the study of the Suffrage Movement, the history of the birth control movement in the US, the contemporary...
women's movement, feminist theories and an array of contemporary feminist issues.

Diversity in Programming
During the spring 2004 semester, the WS 200 students were presented with programs addressing the presence of women in the Civil Rights Movement; gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (glbt) concerns, particularly in relation to institutionalized homophobia and legislative issues; the social activism of a nun whose four companions were killed in El Salvador in 1981; and the life of Pearl S. Buck, presented via creative re-enactment by a professional actress/storyteller. Each of the programs was designed to deepen student understanding of various issues addressed throughout the semester in the course. This process of the academic coming "alive" for students is exemplified in one student's response to an in-classroom presenter: "The presenter solidified in my mind the concept of the anatomy of a social movement. It helped bring into focus key points that are similar in the women's movement and Civil Rights Movement."

Powerful Presentations
One particularly powerful presentation was offered by Helen O'Neal McCray, instructor of English at Wilberforce University in Dayton, Ohio, who was an activist in the contemporary Civil Rights Movement. During her presentation, McCray discussed how she was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a teacher at the Freedom Schools, and that she was jailed a number of times for her commitment to social change and direct action. McCray's presentation followed a fairly traditional format as she shared information on her involvement and the work of other prominent women in the movement. She finished by taking questions from students. What distinguished McCray's program from a class in which the course instructor might have lectured on these same issues is that McCray told her own story. She offered a personal narrative of her decisions to engage in the work of the movement as a young college student, her family's fears for her safety, the dangers and realities surrounding her work with the SNCC on the Freedom Riders and at the Freedom Schools. The students had heard previously of activists such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, who were central to the work of the nonviolent movement. What McCray offered was her own account of her relationship with these women and what they taught her of direct action and social reform. Hearing an interactive, first-person narrative of a social activist's experiences transformed the students' understanding of the Civil Rights Movement from "textbook" to "real-life."

Like McCray's presentation, Sister Christine Rody, General Superior of the Congregation (Cleveland, OH area), Vincentian Sister of Charity, spoke of her own work with the people of El Salvador who were being crushed under that country's United States-supported military regime. She showed slides of families living in dire poverty and talked of the day-to-day struggles of the nation's citizens. Prior to her presentation, stu-

dents had explored issues of poverty locally and globally and had examined the ways that race, gender, and educational opportunities impact economic conditions for individuals and communities. Many students, who themselves are making financial sacrifices in order to attend college, appreciate the impact of poverty, yet tend to see poverty as something that can be easily changed with a degree or the right job. They do not understand what it means to live in the kind of poverty that compels parents to choose between food or shelter. And while they understand how a degree will help them improve their earning potential, they do take basic literacy for granted and do not understand a country in which people are prevented from becoming literate.

After Sister Christine's program, one student wrote: "Sister Christine Rody's speech opened my eyes to issues I didn't know existed. I did not realize the amount of poor nor that it was so evil to teach them something as simple as learning how to read. It impacted my view on the value of literacy and how lucky we are to have the opportunity to learn to grow as we do."

Promoting the College by Involving Community Members in Campus Life
When our programs are open to the entire campus and community, the students have the experience of hearing not only from the speaker but also from those members of the community who bring a unique perspective to the work of the speaker. Miriam Winter, author of Trains: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood During and After World War II, was one such speaker who has returned to the College on three different occasions. Winter has had great appeal to all ages in the local community. While her visit was not co-sponsored by a community organization, she had the effect of bringing together the community and the student body.

At her spring 2004 presentation, in an audience of approximately 80 people, the population was virtually evenly divided between community and students. Some of those community members said they had heard Winter during her previous visits to the College and were returning to hear her again. For our students, Winter is the primary focus of the event, but inevitably, they find themselves in conversation with some of the older community members, as well, and take away from those interactions new perspectives about this period of history.

The Task of Creating Effective Programming
None of these programs would have such an effect if they were not properly contextualized in preceding class meetings. Particularly in these times when students seem to come to college with less and less knowledge of history and its impact upon contemporary society, faculty need to provide a foundation upon which the actual program can build.
Preparation

To prepare for McCray’s program, for example, students spent one class session viewing a 50-minute segment of the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize: Ain’t Scared of Your Jails* (1960-1981), a film series depicting the work of the SNCC, including footage of actual protests in which McCray was involved. Additionally, the instructor addressed the status of women and the currents of change of that time that soon became the contemporary women’s movement.

Some might argue that too much class time is designated to proper preparation for the speakers. For this reason, it is especially important to have a student activities coordinator who truly understands the curricular issues of the campus and of individual courses, is aware of annual cycles of course offerings and schedules and individual instructors’ teaching styles.

Commitment

Additionally, a commitment to programming means that the instructor is willing to schedule the syllabus around the dates on which presenters are available. Since programs are arranged many months in advance, effective coordination of the syllabus requires little more than good communication between faculty and the student activities coordinator, as well as a willingness on the instructor’s part to remain flexible. The instructor also needs to be aware of the potentially limited experiences and exposure of the students in order to help them make links throughout the semester between various segments of the course.

Activities Coordinator’s Role

The majority of the work involved in creating effective co-curricular programming rests upon the student activities coordinator. The process begins as soon as the course schedule for the fall semester is published, which is typically March of the previous semester. The student activities coordinator peruses the fall schedule and selects all the courses that are conducive to presentations on topical information. The coordinator contacts faculty members and asks if there is someone who may be of interest to the student body, as well as to the community. Often, the coordinator makes suggestions based on the availability of particular speakers coming to our area.

Since the coordinator actively ensures that she is aware of the course offerings, it is much easier to offer co-curricular programming. Additionally, the coordinator works with clubs and organizations on campus and always suggests using their funds to bring in speakers. As we are a commuter college, our community is very supportive of the programming that occurs on our campus. They are invited to attend and do attend a large portion of our programs.

During the spring semester, the college chooses a book for the All College Book program led by two humanities professors. Each year, the college attempts to do several programs stemming from the All College Book. The student activities coordinator assists in bringing in speakers who have expertise in certain aspects of the chosen book.

In October, the coordinator solicits suggestions from the faculty, staff, and student clubs and organizations on diversity topics. The college celebrates diversity during February with approximately 15 programs.

Programming is offered throughout the academic year, depending on course offerings, student group and faculty suggestions. It is tied to particular courses and enriches the lives of students, faculty, staff and the community.

Some presentations have included:

- Sara Holbrook, a regionally known professional storyteller, presenting a storytelling experience as well as a workshop for early childhood education majors;
- Judith Black, a nationally known storyteller, offering a workshop for education majors, as well as a first-person interpretation of Lucy Stone for the Women’s Studies classes; and
- Karen Vuranch, who has a theatrical background, offering a first-person interpretation of Pearl S. Buck for the Women’s Studies classes.
Programs Sponsored by Other Campus Entities

In addition, other campus entities have sponsored the following programs:

- The College’s Peace and Justice Club brought the program *Journey of Hope* to discuss capital punishment. It features a panel that discusses the real-life situation of experiencing a loved one being subjected to the death penalty.
- The Visual Communication Technology Organization held a Mardi Gras that included speaker Dr. Jack Santino, professor of popular culture, who presented on festivals in general and Mardi Gras in particular.
- The Women’s Resource Group has cosponsored speakers on women’s rights issues, including the afore-mentioned Hellen O’Neal McCray. McCray was brought to the campus at the request of a cultural pluralism instructor, who saw her at another campus.
- Our instructor of Native American literature has hosted two speakers from the American Indian Education Council, Robert Roche and Lawrence Sampson, who spoke about the American Indian Movement and American Indian Boarding School issues. Sampson was actually brought up in one of the boarding schools.
- The Student Activities Coordinator brings diverse musical groups to campus, each discussing the culture of their music, its origins and transformations. Each group is asked to come to campus *only* if they include such a presentation. Where possible, the coordinator ties the ensemble or group to an appropriate course.
- A sociology professor, who teaches a course titled Minority Groups, has hosted Dr. Bettina Shufford, director of Multicultural and Academic Initiatives at our main campus. She presents a workshop titled “A Card Party,” in which each student is given several playing cards, each representing a characteristic or stereotypical trait of diverse cultures. Students are charged with becoming the “hand they are dealt.” From this exercise, students learn much about stereotypes.
- The professor of political science and Asian Studies and the professor of Philosophy both teach Ethnic Studies and have both hosted presenters such as Ed Ezaki, who speaks first-hand about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the venerable Shih Ying Fa, a Buddhist priest, who discusses general principles of Buddhism.
- The instructors of Spanish, Ethnic Studies and Minority Groups are always willing to bring classes to hear Beatriz Maya, education director at the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO (FLOC), or Baldemar Velasquez, president of FLOC. As these speakers discuss migrant farm workers and the lack of benefits available to them and the hazards they face, including actually dying in the fields from insecticide poisoning, students furiously take notes and ask questions.

Great Enrichment

As we have experienced at Firelands College, in-class and campus-wide programming greatly enrich students’ experiences at the College and offer them important tools for moving out into the world after college. Central to developing these programs are faculty who recognize the value of co-curricular learning and a student activities coordinator who sees him/herself as an educator and an essential part of the academic environment. With those people in place, the learning environment of a campus, especially a regional commuter one, can explode well beyond the walls of the classroom.

References


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