A Five-Point Plan for Low-Cost Programming that Brings in an Audience

By David Zamansky
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Campus programming budgets are always tight. Low-cost, home-grown programs are in high demand. What events are going to draw the crowds? What are some tried and true programs that work? Do we always have to serve food?

The answers to these questions are just a few paragraphs away. I have created a Five-Point Program Plan designed to give you a leg up on low-cost programming. In addition, I have compiled a list of more than 125 programs I've collected during the past 12 years. The list includes events that have been successfully implemented by resident assistants, programming boards, activities professionals, hall directors and other programmers.
The Five-Point Program Plan

Does your program fall into this plan? My contention is that if a program includes even one of the five aspects of this plan, it will have a good shot at being successful. We all know that food brings students to our events, and that is why the subject of food is taken out of the plan’s equation; the program should not be based on food unless it is cultural in nature. However, the equation should include the following:

● The Program Is Short.

What is the number one question we all get as programmers before any type of event? The one that comes up in conjunction with 90% of the events on my campus is, “How long is this going to take?” Other factors determining student attendance include how much homework they have on the date of the event, whether the program will be fun, or what episode of The OC they will be missing if they attend.

If students are assured the program will be a half-hour to 45 minutes, they will more likely “stop by” to see what is going on. In the eyes of a student, a short event is a study break, a quick time slot to see friends and relax. If the program is really good and happens last a little over the time limit, they are more likely to stay because of the “cool factor.”

● The Program Is Different/Out of the Ordinary.

Students love to do things they have never done before or which are just simply weird. For some reason, men flock to facial nights; they have cameras in and for group photos and e-mail them to all their friends. Everyone is fascinated by a fungus growing contest where students can grow their own fungi over time and then present them at a big showing fee night where all in attendance get to judge the growths on the basis of color, smell and originality—not taste (that could be a health hazard).

Students are interested in the outrageous. Their eyes are drawn to anything that allows them to say, “Guess what we are doing/doing tonight?” The only television shows like Fear Factor, Survivor and Ace Tactics stay on the air because of their different/outer the ordinary aspects.

● The Program Is Based on Something We Did as Kids.

Capitalizing on a fascination with the past is a proven way to bring students to your events. They love the chance to be children again and are always talking about all the cool things they did when they were younger. For example, students enjoy playing Jungle, Chutes and Ladders and Battleship during finals. They will enjoy seeing their old favorite Saturday morning cartoons on an LCD on a Wednesday night. Other favorite pastimes that will have them scrambling to attend include games such as Red Light/Green Light, Wonder Ball and Red Rover (with safety precautions), or even an Uno tournament. (I’ll bet some of you are smiling at this point.)

I am always amazed how many students come for a spelling bee. The participants are many, but just as many others show up to be spectators so they can see their friend misspell the word “neighborhood.” Students grew up having these programs in the classroom and on the playground and played them with their siblings; they enjoy reliving these moments on our campuses.

● The Program Has a Competitive Aspect.

Even if all students participating for is pride, they will fight until the bitter end to win a competition. I have seen resident floors/residence halls have week-long competitions with contests like Chubby Bunny, Lifesaver on a Toothpick Pass, Jeopardy, etc., just to see which floor/residence hall on campus is the best (and it is cutthroat).

Recently, our campus has witnessed the resurgence of Texas Hold’Em Tournaments that drive some students participate in just to say they are the best card players in the land. Our dining services held a card tournament without a prize as a finale to its Casino Day this past March. Almost 100 students played, and the tournament lasted until midnight with dining servers staying overtime until the end of the contest.

Competition drives all of us. It is in our nature to want to be the best. Keep this important safety precaution in mind; though: when coming up with any competitive program, make sure to develop as many rules as possible to undermine any arguments/fitting that can occur while playing. Relationships have been lost over a simple game of musical chairs.

● There Is a Prize.

Of course, once a prize is added to the mix, the stakes are raised and the popularity of the event rises tenfold. The prize does not have to be a big one. Students have been known to go crazy over a T-shirt, a pizza party for 10 or a papier-mâché trophy.

Keep in mind this is low-cost programming and should be treated as such. Prizes can be inexpensive—made by your programming board, donated by local businesses, given by a cool kid on campus, etc. Students have gone great lengths to win T-shirts worn by student body presidents, RAs, hall directors or that cool administrator. Make a deal with a local store that if 10 Rubik’s Cubes are bought, they will donate 10 more for your 90’s Name That Tune/Trivia Contest. Prizes can make all the difference.

Continued
125 and Counting: Ideas for Low-Cost Programming

(Grouped by general category; some ideas might fit in multiple categories.)

Charity/Fund-raising
- Pie in the Face Night for Fun/Charity
- RA Auction

Crafts
- Decorate Fish Bowls
- Make Your Own T-shirt
- Jelly Jars
- Tie-dye Night
- Video You Make for Later in the Semester
- Design a T-shirt

Food and Fun
- Bakeoff (Best Campus Baker)
- A Dining Catering Night (Taco Bar, Baked Potato Bar, etc.)
- Cookout
- Cross Food Eating Contest
- Pancake/Belgian Waffle Breakfast
- Ice Cream Social (Combine with another event.)
- Whine & Cheese Party
- Cookie Bake
- Spaghetti Dinner
- Holiday Dinner
- S’mores Feast
- Pizza Dinner
- Coffee/Hot Chocolate Break
- Cheerios with Whip Cream in the Face
- Take the Pepsi Challenge (or any type of food or drink)
- Mountain Dew Drinking Contest
- Best Pizza in Town Fest (Annual Award Event)
- Sub-Eating Contest
- Picnic at a Local Park or Open Area on Campus

Games
- Foosball Tournament
- Dodgeball Tournament
- Bacchi Ball
- Casino Night
- Bingo Night Hall
- Simon Says
- Big Video Game Tourney
- Campus-wide Card Tourney (WHIST, Hearts, Spades, etc.)
- Reverse Scavenger Hunt
- A Night of Wacky Games: Chubby Bunny, Lifesaver on Toothpick, The Mummy, etc.
- Games Night (Pictionary, Outburst, Trivial Pursuit, etc.)
- Movie Trivia Night

- Name that Tune Contest
- ‘80s Name that Tune & Trivia Contest
- Room-to-Room Miniature Golf
- Challenge a Building at a Sports Event in the Rec Center
- Assassin Tournament
- Condom Olympics
- Roommate Game
- Dating Game
- Egg Hunt
- Egg Drop
- Win, Lose, or Draw
- Musical Chairs
- Red Light/Green Light, Wonder Ball, Hide ‘n’ Seek, etc.
- Hall Family Feud/Jeopardy
- Hollywood Squares on the Side of the Building
- Spelling Bee/Geography Bee

Health and Wellness
- Local Massage Therapy School Night
- Backrub Social
- Facial Night (Guys do love this.)

Miscellaneous
- Take a Hall/Group Photo
- Encourage New Murals

Novelty
- Fungus Growing Contest

Performance/Interactive
- Campus Idol (American Idol)
- Spoons
- Survivor Night with Competitions
- Junkpile Wars
- Tattoo Showoff
- Trading Spaces (In real life)
- Values Auction
- A ‘70 or ‘80s Party
- Coffee House
- Local Hypnotist
- Hall Scavenger Hunt
- Line Dancing Lessons in the Lounge
- Floor vs. Floor Twister Tourny (You can use JELL-O)
- Tuck-ins
- Ice Breakers on Open Lawn
- Murder/Mystery Night
- Organize a $25,000 Pyramid
- Talent Night
- Funniest Person on Campus Contest
- Capture the Flag (Map out the campus.)
- Do Your Own Talk Show on Hard-hitting Issues

Recreation
- Apple Picking in the Fall
- Ultimate Frisbee Tournament
- Ping Pong/Pool Tournament
- Make Your Own Fan Club for an Athlete
- Sledding After the First Big Snowfall
- Challenge a Building/Group at a Sporting Event
- Touch Football
- Volleyball Tournament

Social
- Rock Painting Party
- Nail Painting Party
- Lounge/Door Decorating Contests for Any Special Occasion
- Secret Valentine, Snowflakes, etc.
- Pajama Party Hump Night
- Clothing Swap
- Pumpkin Carving
- Monday Night Football
- Crash an Opposite Sex Party (Monday Night Football, Dawson’s Creek)
- Take a Hall/Group Photo
- Cool Tricks:
  - Everything You Wanted to Know about the Opposite Sex
  - How to Please Your Partner
  - What Pisses You Off
  - Can Men and Women be Friends?
- Open House
- Letters from a Nut Party
- Make a Machine Social
- Head Viking Social
- Would You Rather? Night
- Themed TV Nights (Alias, The Apprentice)
- Get E-Mail Addresses & Start Conversation Line

Team Building
- Team-Building Activities
The Five-Point Program Plan

- The program is short.
- The program is different out of the ordinary.
- The program is based on something we did as kids.
- The program has a competitive aspect.
- There is a prize.

Low-Cost Programs for Everyone

The programs listed on the previous page all fall into the Five-Point Plan and have been successfully implemened by programming boards, RAs, hall directors, activities professionals, and other programers. There are more than 125 programs listed, ranging from the weird (Cheerios with Whipped Cream in the Face) to the obvious (a ping-pong tournament). All of them serve as reminders of what low-cost opportunities are available to campuses. Most of the time, it is the obvious program right in front of us that can be the most successful, but we do not always see it (for example, Hollywood Squares on the side of a residence hall at dawn).

If after reading the list, you have questions as to what in the world some of these programs actually are, feel free to contact me via e-mail (david.zamansky@unh.edu) and I will be happy to explain them to you. In addition, feel free to e-mail me about any successes you have by using these ideas, or let me know about other low-cost programs that have worked for you so the list can continue to grow.

We are often constrained by our budgets. However, with the Five-Point Plan and ideas from the list, we can have some good, cheap fun on our campuses.

About the Author

David Zamansky is assistant director of the Memorial Union at the University of New Hampshire. He previously served the school as Student Organization Services coordinator and as a hall director. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in counseling, both from the University of New Hampshire. In NACA, he served the former NACA New England Region as a member of the regional conference educational session committee and as a roundtable coordinator. He is also affiliated with the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the Commission for Student Involvement (CSI). In CSI, he has served as vice chair of personnel and vice chair of administration and is currently chair-elect.

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don't get lost in the maze!