Programming with Restricted Budgets: Three Areas Where You Can Increase Efficiency

By Chuck Steele and Tom Krieglstein

Whenever you are working with other people's money, rule number one is to respect those people and their money. The best way to do that is to spend their money judiciously. But that does not mean that you must be cheap. Being cheap doesn't serve anyone. Spending judiciously means being efficient; maximizing their return or getting the most bang from their buck. This should always be your top priority, especially if you're on a community college campus.

When programming on any college campus, no matter if it's a two-year or four-year school, we all work with other people's money. Whether funded directly from students through student activities fees or from the community through education fund accounts, the bottom line is the money is not ours. It is also true that most of us would never waste money intentionally, but it is important to realize that it sometimes does happen. Occasionally, we get reminders to check ourselves and check our processes. One of these reminders might be a budget cut, which seems to be something that is happening to many these days.
The following are three areas where you may be able to increase your organization's fiscal efficiency: the budgeting process, maximizing your campus/community resources and negotiation.

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Budgeting Process

When a budget cut comes, a common reaction is just to start making cuts across the board—cut the number of shows, cut the amount you pay talent, cut the number of students who go to conferences, etc. While some of these cuts may be necessary, this is not effective fiscal thinking.

For many, budgets are one of those things that typically evolve over time with slight changes occurring from year to year. Adapting a budget on a year-to-year basis may seem to make sense in the short run. But in the long run, tweaks and adjustments that make sense initially can become outdated over time. And it's very easy to end up in a backwards situation where the budgets dictate the programming decisions instead of the programming decisions dictating the budgets.

One way to check the efficiency and appropriateness of your budget is to take a fresh look at it. This can be done using zero-based budgeting. Start with all accounts back at zero. By reducing all budget amounts to zero, students are forced to re-examine why are they doing what they're doing and how they're going to do it. And it is important to notice the order of the questions. Examine the why's before the how's. Why is there a programming board? Then how are you going to accomplish its goals? By examining things in this order, you are also forced to develop the criteria that will be used when confronting the tough questions such as what types of programming you have been doing that are no longer effective or useful for your campus, and what are the programming needs of your campus that are not being addressed?

Naturally, it would also make perfect sense to be re-examining your mission and vision at the same time. And for advisors, this is an opportunity to be sure you're connected to the student needs of your campus. Often, because we're not asking questions, we receive no new information. And in the absence of new information, we assume that things are fine, thereby unintentionally perpetuating ineffective programming. By forcing our students to examine these questions, we are also forcing ourselves to listen.

Maximizing Your Campus/Community Resources

It's important to remember that funding is just one of the resources available to your organization. To be operating at maximum efficiency, you should be ta-
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Your marketing ability is maximized through a wider audience base and increased manpower. Typically, each club or office has a different set of potential audience members. By programming together, you naturally increase the potential audience base by combining those separate audiences. On our campus, face-to-face marketing (i.e. visiting cafeteria tables or posting flyers) methods are the most effective. Through collaboration, the pool of people available to walk around the lunchroom or make classroom announcements is increased.

What should not be missed is that the mere act of clubs and offices working together in collaboration builds or reinforces the feeling of community on campus. And for most programming boards, that is part of their mission. Therefore, just by working together one of the board's goals is being accomplished with virtually no money being spent.

The other campus resource that often gets underutilized is community talent. When you are trying to maximize your budget, it's a good idea to tap into your local scene. If you're in a smaller community, your local scene may include the closest mid-sized city. The reason for booking locally goes beyond getting inexpensive talent. First and foremost, it's always worthwhile to support the arts on a local level. Second, these acts build a following on your campus, it’s easier to rebook them. Third, local acts usually have their own followings and can help with their own marketing. You may even be able to pay them a percentage of the door, something that has worked very well for us here at College of DuPage (IL). This is a win-win situation for the bands and us. We can't lose money, and they can have an impact on how much they make.

So how do you tap into the local scene? Easy. Go to shows! If you're looking for coffeehouse acts, go to actual coffeehouses! If you're looking for bands, take in a few shows in a variety of venues. Most bands will put you on a guest list, saving your organization the cost of a cover charge. But even if you have to pay, the money spent in scouting will more than be made up in frugal bookings.

Thinking locally also means looking within your own school for talent. The most obvious idea is to host open mic shows, which can be great events. Just keep a couple things in mind. First, be sure to have an emcee who can keep things rolling. Most open mics have a variety of talent levels. That is part of what makes them fun. But what you don't want is too many lower-level talents grouped together. A good emcee will be able to do a song or some material of their own and keep the energy level of the show going.

Second, allow performers to sign up ahead of time. There's nothing worse than an open mic where nobody shows up. Along those lines, actively search out performers and schedule them. It never hurts to have a few ringers, and most open mics need a couple of performers to get things rolling.

And finally, make it more than just an open mic. At College of DuPage, our open mics are auditions to perform as opening acts for touring shows. This is great for us, because not only are we getting a free performance at an open mic, we are also able to create a better touring show by providing an opening act at no extra cost. Another idea, shared by a colleague, is to use the American Idol format. They have a few experts from campus to do the critiquing.

By recognizing alternative resources, you are decreasing your reliance on funding and increasing your opportunity to be creative.

**Negotiation**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there's negotiation. Believe it or not, sometimes people overpay for talent. Shocking, but true. In order to keep talent costs down, it is important to understand what drives those costs up. More often than not, it's lack of preparation in negotiating. Wingeing it inevitably leads to higher prices. When you're trying to keep costs down, you should call an agent only when you are fully prepared.

Being unprepared costs money.

The first step in most bookings is to list your open dates. The next step is to create and prioritize a wish list of talent to fill those needs. Your wish list should consist of two or three potential talents for each open date. If you need to get booking approval from a group, always have them approve a list rather than a specific act. Having options gives you more leeway and speeds the negotiation process. It can also increase your comfort level with saying no, but more on that later.

Now, without looking at each talent's book price, decide how much you think each talent is worth to your organization.
How you determine that is really up to you. Some considerations are market price—what are comedians in your neck of the woods getting for a similar gig? If you're hiring a coffeehouse musician, how much are the local coffeehouses paying? How much other similar talent is available to fill the date? How much does the "name" influence your marketing?

When you mention the talent around your campus, do people know who they are?

Also be sure to include extras like travel and hotel in your worth assessment. (One side note here: Over the years, we have developed a "flat rate" policy. We do not pay travel and hotel. It simply became too much to manage and there was too much variation among talent. It also sometimes raised prices more than was anticipated. This flat rate policy has made budgeting and negotiations infinitely easier.)

Once you have established each talent's worth to your organization, this becomes your bottom line price—your deal-breaker, your walk-away point. It is very important that this is determined ahead of time. You don't want to be on the phone trying to decide what price you think is okay to pay. You should also never be intimidated if your assigned value is not in sync with someone's booking price. That is okay. You should make an offer anyway. No honest offer is ever insulting, and the worst that can happen is they will say no. If you would really like to get someone but are well below their asking price, sometimes it helps to offer them a variety of dates. If a booking works in with their schedule, they are more likely to consider a lower offer. If they do say no, that's okay; just move to the next person on your list.

When it comes to negotiating with agents, the main thing is to never feel intimidated. This does not mean intimidated by the agents, but intimidated by the situation. For most students, this is the first time they are involved in the process of negotiation and often are not trained in this area, making it easy for them to become overwhelmed. The best way to combat that, as mentioned earlier, is to be prepared.

It also helps to understand the situation. A negotiation is nothing more than an attempt to come to an agreement. The success of the process is not dependent on reaching an agreement; it is determined by whether there was an honest and forthright attempt by both sides. As long as both sides have been honest and cordial, the negotiations have been successful.

You may often hear about power or control in negotiations. In an ethical negotiation, no party tries to exert power over the other. That said, however, you do want to maintain control of the situation. What that means is not being nervous. It means being prepared and having a plan. It means knowing your walkaway point. It means having a way off the phone. One thing I tell all new student bookers is to have an exit strategy to get off the phone. It's a fact that the longer you're on the phone with an agent, the more likely you are to agree to something you're not comfortable with. That's not necessarily anyone's fault, but it can be the way things happen.

Finally, "no" happens. Never be afraid of telling an agent no, and at the same time do not be offended if you are told no. In fact, no is probably said more often than yes. Remember, that is why you have created a list. If one deal does not work out, then simply go down your prioritized list. Always be aware that there is always another person/group out there just as talented as the one that didn't work out. Some students are afraid to say no. They feel obligated to accept a deal out of a false sense of duty to the agent because the agent spent time with them, put a date on hold or prematurely sent them a contract. Those things do not obligate you to make a booking. As long as you are negotiating and fact-finding in good faith, it is always okay to say no to a deal. The only time it is unethical to say no is after you both have actually confirmed the date. Remember, never say yes until you're sure it's yes.

The last word on negotiation is to keep in mind that when you interact with an agent, you are affecting not only your own personal relationship with the agent, but that of your school and future students. In a nutshell, be polite, mind your manners, be truthful and straightforward.

An Opportunity to Be Creative

So, in an effort to maintain your organization's fiscal efficiency, there are three areas on which you can keep tabs—the budgeting process, using your campus/community resources and negotiation. The most important thing is to never use the need to be fiscally responsible as a crutch not to do things. It should be looked on as an opportunity to be creative and really polish your business skills.

About the Authors

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