Retreats as a Member Retention Tool

By Lucy Croft

Wow! What a great organization—it provides me with a sense of belonging, purpose, recognition and achievement. I feel like I can contribute to the well being of the organization with my talents and skills. I know what is expected and feel confident in the leadership. This is an organization to which I can remain loyal and committed.

Does this sound too good to be true? Organizations that provide clear purpose and direction as well as a place for members to grow, develop and be challenged have a greater chance to achieve membership satisfaction, which equates to membership retention.
All you have to do is look at the listing of educational sessions at NACA National Conventions and regional conferences to confirm there is a need to educate students on how best to retain members. Sessions with titles such as "Recruitment, Retention and Recognition of Volunteers," "You Have Them, Now What?" "Keeping the Energy," "Getting Them and Keeping Them" or "Please Stick Around" consistently appear throughout these events.

Retention is defined as keeping your possessions. To best develop strategies for keeping the possessions known as your members, it is first best to understand their motivational needs.

Hager and Brudney (2004), in their publication Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers, said, "Charities (organizations) interested in increasing retention of volunteers should invest in recognizing volunteers, providing training and professional development for them, and screening volunteers and matching them to organizational tasks (p. 1)." They continue, adding, "Charities can provide a culture that is welcoming to volunteers, allocate sufficient resources to support them, and enlist volunteers in recruiting other volunteers (p. 1)."

If creating a sense of growth, purpose and community are necessary for member satisfaction, then organizations have an obligation to meet these criteria. One of the best ways to address these needs is to conduct a retreat. "Retreats offer a time of seclusion for contemplation, time that an organization can use to accomplish one or several important goals," (Croft & Lee, 1996, p. 49).

Throughout my tenure in student activities, I have witnessed student organizations engaging in retreats; some for the purpose of educating new members or officer transition, others as a vehicle for planning the year or dealing with conflict. Whatever the reason, effective retreats can serve as an excellent retention tool.

In an informal, non-scientific survey of 35 student leaders from student government and programming groups conducted for this article, 33 of the 35 students said retreats do assist with membership retention. Of these 33 students, 22 said the main reason retreats foster retention is that they encourage members to bond with one another. One student government member confirmed the value of retreats by saying, "Retreats provide an important outlet for spending an extended period of time with those you work with sporadically during the week. It is a recharge for old members that reminds them why they are involved in a group."

Another student said, "Feeling like part of a group is one of the most powerful influences in human existence. Retreats have a tendency to personalize the members of the group. This strengthens the group as a whole and, therefore, increases their maximum output as a group. When you feel like part of a group, you are then less likely to leave it, thus increasing retention."

Retreats are designed to provide common ground for attendees. "They enhance the overall experience for participants and create shared experiences," (Croft & Lee, 1996, p. 50). Through the intensity and focus of the experience, I have seen creative working relationships form among members. I have been empathically surprised to witness apathetic members blossom into vital, engaged members. I have seen acquaintances grow into solid friendships. And I have observed a level of bonding and connectedness that is difficult to forge during the day-to-day demands of student life.

Sharing also implies participation from all members. Of course, within student groups there are some members who are more involved or outgoing than others. Therefore, it is essential for the planners to be aware of the group dynamics prior to the retreat, or to quickly pick up on dynamics during the early stages. By understanding the dynamics, it is possible to draw out more introverted members and also encourage participation by those who may not see the value of the event.

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Defining Purpose

From a motivational perspective, volunteers need to understand their purpose and role within the organization in addition to its general mission. There is a basic assumption that students will join an organization because they are attracted to its mission and purpose. For example, if a student wants to engage in community service, then he/she may join an organization such as Habitat for Humanity, whereas a student interested in leadership development may become a member of Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honor Society. Assuming this to be true, then the real test of the organization is make sure it is fulfilling its mission. If the organization is not fulfilling its mission, there are bigger issues to address before even considering membership retention.

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However, assumptions can get you into trouble. Therefore, to ensure an equal level of knowledge of the organization’s mission, it should be incorporated into the retreat curriculum and prominently displayed throughout the retreat facility to encourage further discussion and understanding. “When student leaders can keep their organization involved in matters within its stated purpose, the organization maintains strong leadership and meets its goals,” (Dunkel and Schuh, p. 13).

Defining the members’ purpose, or role, within the organization is also crucial. All organization members must know they have a function, purpose, and personal identity within the group at large. During a retreat, experiential exercises can be implemented to bring out the various talents and strengths of the members as well as define their roles within the organization. Utilizing assessment tools such as the Team Dimension Profile, True Colors and/or Myers-Briggs can assist with defining roles and personality styles. This deeper level of understanding lends itself to better communication, trust and a sense of connectedness.

A member of a programming board who participated in my survey confirms the value of deeper understanding as a strategy when difficult issues materialize long after a retreat: “Retreats give members a chance to really get to know and understand each other without the stress of meetings, etc. Then after the retreat, members have a feeling of really knowing each other and can used this as a tool when discussing situations, etc.”

Creating Development

Implementing a retreat serves as a vehicle for educating, developing and challenging students to become engaged members who will contribute to the organization’s success.

The skill building initiated during the retreat will long carry over into their daily encounters with peers, faculty, staff and potential employers. The rewards for campus involvement noted by Dunkel and Schuh (1998) include being recognized, making friends, gaining new transferable skills, achieving goals and having purpose.

A Word of Caution

While planning a retreat, keep in mind one theme behind every component: intentional. Every aspect of the retreat should be considered and structured to maximize its value. Remember your members’ needs and that successful retreats require meaningful content. From weeks before to the weeks following the retreat, there should be a relational explanation for every activity, logistic and meal planned.

A single weekend or day retreat is only one component of a successful retention
Retreats:
- Create a sense of growth;
- Define purpose;
- Foster a sense of community; and
- Serve as an excellent retention tool.

According to Hager and Brudney (2004), organizations interested in increasing retention should:
- Recognize volunteers;
- Provide training and professional development; and
- Match volunteers to tasks.

strategy. If retreats are poorly planned with no real intent, then members may become frustrated and irritated by the lack of respect for their time. One student leader stated in my survey that he did not believe retreats contribute to retention. "Most of the content of retreats (that I have attended) is not well-planned enough to justify the time spent on a retreat. We need more professionally organized retreats," he said.

This sentiment is reiterated by Eich (2005): "Some leadership conferences lack intentional leadership content. Others closely resemble an extended social/recreational time consumed by games, candy eating and fun. The fun should stay, but learning, informed teaching and leadership development should be infused as well (p. 17)."

No retreat can be successful without a clearly defined and communicated set of goals and objectives. Although some retreats may not successfully resolve all the issues on the agenda, it is still important to have them. The planners should use good judgment in setting these objectives in a realistic manner, giving the retreat purpose without establishing outcomes that are overly ambitious. Additionally, planners must take into consideration choosing appropriate exercises, diverse facilitators, facilities, food, evaluations and other logistics crucial to the success of the retreat.

Why Is Member Retention So Important?

According to Dunkel and Schuh (1998), there are several institutional rewards that come directly from engaged students in clubs and organizations: the institution's ability to attract and recruit new students, improve retention rates of students, and seek advice and feedback from student peer advisory and governance groups during event planning and crisis management.

So if your institution wants to create a campus of engaged student leaders, you might start with executing a retreat to address students' motivational needs and shared sense of belonging.

References