Imagine, if you will, that it is a Monday in early May. Last weekend offered the most beautiful weather you have seen this spring: a light breeze, 70 degrees, and not a cloud in the sky. The problem is that this upcoming weekend is the annual Spring Jam Weekend—an outdoor day of inflatable rides, carnival food, and an all-day concert culminating with the headlining act as the final performance. The weather reports are indicating that a cold front is approaching and could be here by Friday and not leaving until Sunday. It is calling for the possibility of precipitation and highs in the ’50s.

Fast forward to the following Thursday.

The weather reports are guaranteeing cold, wet weather for the weekend. Everything has been arranged for an outdoor event and the only talk of rain that has ever been discussed was in jest due to the assumed certainty that Mother Nature would give you only her best. Your options are to cancel, postpone, or move to an inside location. What do you do?
What I have described above is actually not imaginary. This is a real situation that the Campus Activities Board at Drexel University (PA) faced in May of 2002. With fantastic weather the previous weekend, we had high hopes that our Spring Jam weekend would be just as nice. We were to discover that this would not be the case.

So, how did we make it work? I can honestly say that making the rain call work would not have been possible without solid team planning from start to finish. Through this article, I will share the lessons we learned that may assist you in saving your own events should you find yourselves needing to make a rain call for a major event. While the following will provide a general outline of what you will need to do, keep in mind that each campus is unique in how it handles making major event rain calls and you may have to handle some details differently.

From the beginning of the planning process, operations meetings should be held, whether or not a rain call is in the works. If a rain call is becoming more of a possibility, an operations meeting of the major players should be called only to talk about a possible rain call. It is at this meeting that contingency plans will be outlined and what special procedures must be followed to ensure the successful completion of your event. It is very important to keep accurate notes from these meetings to be sure who is responsible for each aspect of the event.

The Minor Players

While I may refer to them as minor players, these people are still just as important as any other in the success of the event. The list includes artists or middle agents, the rented stage and lighting company, novelty companies, opening acts and volunteers. While these people are just as important in making the event a success, they are not as immediately involved when it comes to making a rain call decision. Still, you cannot produce your event without them, so it is your responsibility, as an event coordinator, to let these people know of any changes in a timely manner so that they are able to

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The Major Players

Because most campuses' Spring Jam/Fest type events take place at the end of the academic year, you should have had many opportunities throughout the year to develop relationships with different service departments and their key contact people. The major areas and people with whom you should be concerned are: security, unions/facilities, rain location staff, catering, and most important of all—your fellow student programmers.

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The Rain Site

At Drexel University, our Spring Jam takes place on the outdoor athletic field in the center of campus. It is by far the largest and most conducive space for Spring Jam. The site that was chosen this past year for a rain call was the gym. The interior of the gym is smaller than the space at the athletic field. Therefore, changes to layout, choice of rides and other attractions, placement of vendors, etc. had to be made.

One of the things we have learned is that when the rain location is being inspected, there is key information you must obtain. Ascertain the exact dimensions of the space, where electrical outlets are located, and where dressing rooms can be placed in relation to the stage. It is very helpful to draw a scale map of the space and experiment with layouts of attractions. This can be done weeks or months in advance of the event if you know that far ahead which attractions you have chosen.

It is essential that students programmers are involved in the rain call process—your creativity and insight can be extremely helpful in making any changes to the attractions or to help plan the layout of the space. I have discovered as an advisor that what I think may be the only option is simply just one possible solution. I have found that students have been able to show me better ways to resolve a situation.

The student in charge of our daytime events was able to work with the inflatables company and identify a day-of contingency plan. She was able to work out two such plans. Plan A would proceed as if the weather were ideal and that attractions one, two, three, and four would be delivered. Plan B plan would be if the weather were working against us that day and attractions one, two, five and six would be chosen. Fortunately for us, we were able to work things out so that the costs would be the same regardless of which plan we ultimately had to follow.

There are other issues that must be investigated regarding a rain site. Communicate with your technical services crew, whether they are a part of the school or come from an outside source. What will they need to make it work on their end? Will they need more power? Will they need less power, and if so, will it save money? Can the rain site handle all power requirements or will a generator be needed? Is there money in the budget for a generator? Does an electrician or inspector need to be present?

The Walk-Through

A very important element of working out the details of a rain site is to make an actual walk-through of the space under consideration. No matter how many times you have used, seen, or held a similar event in your chosen rain site, DO A WALK-THROUGH. You never know if some small section of the space has been changed since the last time it was used, and there is no better way to determine this than to do a walk-through. I strongly encourage you to do the walk-through of the facility with the major players involved to view how the stage, attractions, and food would be set up. This is where students can really use their creative skills to adapt the event from the outdoor to the indoor space.

Additional Tools

It has been said that dogs, birds, or even llamas can tell when a storm is approaching. I am not sure about your school, but we do not keep a spare weather-warning llama on hand on the chance we will need to use it to make a rain call. The next best option is to do as much research as possible. Research in this case means using the Internet to check as many weather sites as necessary.
Whenever you have to make a rain call, don’t forget to assess the event and the execution of the changes you had to make after it’s all over.


Although the actual rain call is made either the day before or the day of the event, it can be very useful to check Web sites during the week leading up to the event. This can help you make the final rain call earlier than at the last minute and can help to ease the transition and handling of final details for all concerned.

Another tool that can assist in making the final decision can often be found in the headline of a contract. In some cases, when a performer knows they are going to be playing a date outdoors, they write weather clauses into their contracts. The headliner we chose for the 2002 Spring Jam stipulated in their contract that they would not perform outside if the temperature fell below 60 degrees. This kind of information assists in putting all the pieces together and can help you make an informed decision and lead to a better understanding for all as to why a rain call must be made.

Important Checklists

I believe checklists are very important. We encourage our students to outline every last detail that must be managed to ensure the event will be a success. I keep a large dry erase board in my office listing major points involved and I will type up a list of nitty-gritty details for our student programmers (and for me, too). There are usually several checklists we use: a two-weeks prior to event checklist, day-of event checklist, and an after-event checklist. We meet regularly to review the checklists to see what we can cross off as we work toward the day of the event. By checking things off our lists, we are able to obtain a visual perspective of what we have done and what we have left to complete. This type of organized approach helps to make any event successful, but it also makes it easier for you should you have to make a rain call.

Getting the Word Out

So, you have made the call and your outdoor event is now going to be held indoors. Once the call has been made, it is important that each and every person who is involved with the event be noti- 

It's always a good idea to schedule a meeting with the entire programming board before a rain call is made. This meeting can serve to share with everyone all the details and factors involved in the rain call. Once everyone understands the process, they can, in turn, help alleviate the concerns of the general student body about the event being moved.

When All Is Said and Done

When all was said and done, our event was a success! While we did not have as large a turnout as the previous year, we still enjoyed significant attendance. And since our alternate location was smaller than the original, it appeared to all who were present that our turnout was quite large. The majority of our success goes to the student planning committee and their work with the major and minor players. However, some of the event's success could be attributed to the headlining band, whose members were so adaptable that they walked around during the event, participating in rides and games with the students.

Whenever you have to make a rain call, don’t forget to assess the event and the execution of the changes you had to make after it’s all over. What worked and what did not? What could be done differently? What would make it better next year or for another event under similar circumstances? The key to assessing a rain call event is to understand that you are assessing the indoor site as if future events are to be held in the same place. Taking thorough notes throughout the course of your event will be very helpful when it comes time for assessment. That way, you won’t have to depend upon your memory for important details, many of which can be forgotten under the pressure of putting it all off.

With a bit of creative skill and positive attitude, any event moved due to bad weather can still be a success. The situation may not always be ideal, but we can choose our attitude in making every event a good experience for everyone involved.

About the Author

Jon Kapell is associate director of Campus Activities at Drexel University (PA). He holds a bachelor’s degree in communication studies from West Chester University (PA) and a master’s degree in human services administration from Rider University (NJ). He is currently a volunteer for the Kappa Delta Rho national fraternity. This is his first article for Programming.