A Focus on Campus Life:

What type of programming is right for your campus?

by Jeffrey D. Turner and Abby Fifer

The programs and activities offered within the college union are as important as the physical facility itself. Increasingly, senior administrators are questioning college union professionals, consultants, and planners about how facility improvements will directly enhance campus life. It is now necessary to show how college union programs and services support the modern day version of education's three "R's"—recruitment (of new students), retention (of existing students), and renewal (of alumni support).

From work planning facilities for more than 30 college union projects across the United States, it has become clear that adhering to a deliberate, structured model of campus life programming can dramatically improve the quality of students' experience on campus. With many higher education institutions going through a significant budget crisis, the ability to understand, quantify, and defend programming and activities is becoming increasingly important.

This article reviews the campus life initiatives at an assortment of institutions to ascertain "best practices" and suggestions for various campus life programs. This analysis includes discussion of programs as they relate to three campus life models. Observations are based on 14 categories of programs commonly offered at the more than 200 campuses that were surveyed. The article also summarizes contemporary standards, ranging from basic services to new trends and best practices emerging in the last five to 10 years.

Why does campus life programming matter?

For years, researchers have documented the effects of extracurricular involvement on students' experience in college:

> Tinto [1988] suggested that social interaction with members of a new community is a primary vehicle to achieve incorporation, and that failure to achieve incorporation leads to attrition. He concluded that fraternities and sororities, residence hall associations, college unions, visiting faculty and scholar programs, cocurricular programs, and intramural activities offer students opportunities to establish repetitive contact with other members of the institution and thus contribute to successful integration and incorporation into (and retention) in the college community. (Rullman, 2002, p. 37)

In every instance, campus life programs are successful when they are tailored to the specific students at a particular institution. This observation cannot be overstated. Though not all campus life initiatives yield revenue, colleges invest in a variety of programs because they consider campus life to be a priority. Just as an institution may spend significant time and effort developing a master plan for its facilities, it makes sense to also develop a master plan for campus life programming.

A case study: The University of Vermont

In 2002, a campus life study was conducted at The University of Vermont (UVM). The staff at UVM was interested in assessing the university's current programs, services, and facilities; investigating how the university compared to other similar institutions; and noting how campus life at the university could be improved. This study then became a springboard to answering the larger question of how programming is linked with the experiences of college students.

A major part of the study was a review of programming and services at UVM and an in-depth study of programs, services, and facilities at eight peer institutions. While researching events, programs, and activities at these eight peer institutions, an organizational structure became obvious: Every one of the activities in which students were engaging fell into one of 14 categories of on-campus programming. At this point, the research team paused and reflected on other institutions' programs. True to the pattern, the events seen on nearly 200 other campuses confirmed the existence of these 14 categories. The team then discussed its findings with other industry professionals and reviewed books and articles on the subject. With rare exception, any on-campus program on any college or university campus fit into one of 14 program areas: alumni events, community outreach, concerts and music events, faculty/staff specific, film presentations, health and wellness, late-night pro-

grams, performing arts, recreational/club sports, recruitment and retention, service, speakers and guest lecturers, tradition and school spirit, and varsity sports.

The next part of the UVM study involved investigating programs and services at other campuses throughout the United States. Using the 14 categories discussed above, eight peer institutions were researched: Northeastern University, Boston College, Dartmouth College, University of Rochester, University of Colorado–Boulder, University of Connecticut–Storrs, University of Rhode Island, and University of New Hampshire. Information from these schools was gathered in interviews with campus staff and students and from college and university Web sites, university data sheets, and Barron's Profiles of American Colleges (2003). At each campus, demographic data were collected and the following questions were asked:

- How many student groups do you have? Are some kinds more prevalent/popular than others?
- Is there a dedicated space for student organizations? Shared space or offices or both? Are the spaces in the union?
- What kinds of events draw students? What is the attendance at those events?
- What are the best times to hold events and activities for students?
- What has been your experience with late-night and weekend programming?
- What obstacles restrict or limit student participation?
- What types of programs are faculty and staff likely to engage in with students?
- What incentives do you use to encourage faculty and staff and student interaction?
- What obstacles restrict or limit faculty and staff participation?
- Who sponsors programs on your campus?

- How are events funded?
- How do student groups fund events?
- How are events publicized and/or marketed?
- Where are events held?
- What is your relationship with your hometown? What about in terms of events?
- How do students get around? What transportation exists?
- Are students provided with school e-mail accounts? Do they use them? Do they have access to the school Web site or their e-mail account from off campus?
- What are your major traditions?
- What is your homecoming budget?

The "A-ha!" moment

The ultimate goal of the UVM study was to recommend improvements to campus life programming at the institution. While reviewing campus activities at the peer institutions, another pattern began to emerge. Even more significant than the 14 kinds of programming offered by organizations on each campus was the combination through which these opportunities were delivered. Interviews with university students and faculty revealed that consciously or not, campuses subscribed to one of three campus life models according to the nature of programming available on campus.

The following summaries articulate focused campus life models. In the accompanying diagrams, each bubble represents the size and scope of programs with regard to the number of students that organizers intended to attract. The dashed line represents the physical campus.

After the study for UVM was complete, the pattern was tested using other campuses. More than 200 campuses reviewed could be described as adhering to one of the

three models, each defined by the following types of programming:

A Common Experience

- In coordination with major student organizations, a central office at the college or university plans large-scale, campus-wide events multiple times per year.
- Programming funds are apportioned to multiple large events, rather than many small events.
- The events usually incorporate a thematic relationship to the institution (e.g., founder's day, campus film festival).
- The events are designed to foster a sense of community and school pride.
- The events usually are unique to that institution (e.g., rather than a performance by a big-name band, a lesser known band that got its start at that campus might play).
- Attendance at the event is such a tradition among students that the "see and be seen" element is often more significant than the actual event.
- Individual student groups fill in events on weeknights and weekends around these major events.
- These smaller-scale events are usually cultural or educational in nature but may also be purely social. Such events range from a celebration of the Chinese New Year to a poetry slam to a winter ball.

Something for Everyone

- Several major programming bodies typically initiate campus-wide programming. The student activities department or similar entity is often one of these primary sponsors.
- Most programming funds are spent on regular, weekly events designed to accommodate 50 to 300 persons each. Events may include comedic acts, a film
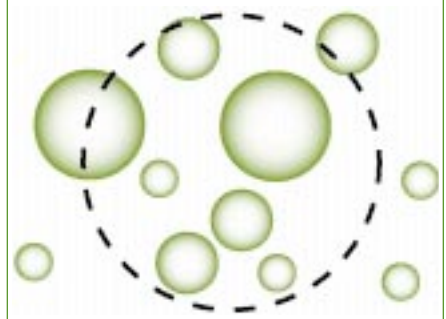
A Common Experience
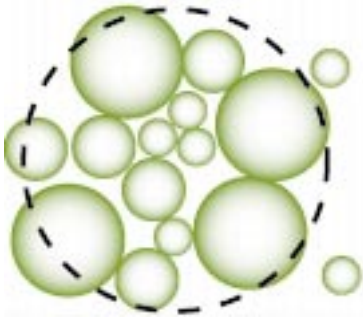
Focus on several special
(larger) progams/events

Something for Everyone
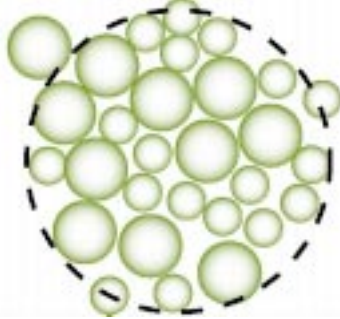
Focus on more diverse
(smaller) progams/events

Independent Endeavors

Students engaged in events
of their own choosing

series, or a coffee house open mic night. To target a variety of students, multiple events may be held on one night.

- At least once per semester, the college or university sponsors a major, all-campus event that is largely social in nature (e.g., a spring festival concert, a hypnotist)
- Individual student groups sponsor monthly programs, usually targeting members of their own groups for attendance.

Independent Endeavors

- Students engage in events of their own choosing, typically unaffiliated with the institution.
- Colleges and universities in this category most often attract students who are interested in the location of the institution. Frequently urban or community college campuses fall into this category.
- In this model, college unions may be host to infrequent community events. These events may take place annually, as in the case of back-to-school or orientation events. More often, events that occur on campus (within the dashed line) are a result of small, informal gatherings among students or student groups.

Understanding your campus model

The key to the campus life models is understanding that no one

model is "better" than another. Rather, a successful campus—one that can defend its programming expenditures when scrutinized—is one that understands each model and chooses the kind of campus it would like to be. Ultimately, the most important lesson in campus life modeling is planning and follow-through.

Therefore, the next obvious question is: "How can I make one of these models work on my campus?" In every case, successful programming occurs as a result of combined student-staff efforts, ample workspace for programming, adequate resources for students, and creative publicity. Before initiating a formal campus life model, the student activities department might want to invite key faculty, staff, and administrators to join in an envisioning session to jointly discuss goals and processes. Because programs are sponsored by a variety of faculty, departments, student organizations, etc., all of those groups should be invited to the table. In this way, all programming entities can work together to develop a focused campus life experience for students.

Best practices and suggestions to get started

At your programmers' envisioning session, invitees should be able to describe the different kinds of events and services sponsored by the department or organization they represent. How should you begin channeling your myriad programs into a successful campus life master plan? Though every institution is different, the fol-

lowing best practices and suggestions might assist in conceptualizing campus-specific models. Each example, found through the research described earlier in the article, has been implemented and met with praise from students and administrators.

- **A comprehensive, navigable, fully linked university Web site** that welcomes visitors to a virtual, online campus. The homepage should direct visitors to separate sections "For Current Students," "For Prospective Students," "For Faculty and Staff," "For Alumni," "For Parents," and "For Guests." The homepage could also include any information designated by the campus as most pertinent, such as an events calendar or a specific event highlighted each week. Information should flow easily from page to page and should adhere to a consistent format for font, size, layout, graphics, and color. University of Rochester and University of Colorado–Boulder are two institutions that use their Web sites to promote their campus activities. While University of Rochester is considered "A Common Experience" campus and University of Colorado–Boulder subscribes to a "Something for Everyone" model, both understand the significance of maintaining communities online that parallel their campuses.

- **A first-year welcome series with faculty involvement.** Programs targeted at first-year students encourage those students to remain a part of the campus community throughout their time at the institution. Boston College, for example, hosts a Freshman Welcome Series, which includes trips to the Boston Art Museum and a Red Sox game. Campuses might consider developing a weekly or biweekly series of outings to nearby museums, performances, and sporting events. The series should be targeted to first-year students but open to all interested students. Participants can purchase tickets at summer orientation or shortly thereafter and pay a flat rate for the year. Faculty and staff members could host trips with underwritten tickets as incentives for their leadership.

- **Housing traditions and a strong staff of resident advisors** encourage university spirit and foster community. Every programming department on campus, not just the campus life department, must lend support to a successful campus life model. The university should consider incorporating class and affinity housing into any residence halls in development. For instance, a campus may want to consider a "senior village" with amenity-rich housing. The University of Virginia, for example, rewards 52 seniors each year with a room in the visual center of campus. At Boston College, juniors look forward to the rite of passage of living in the "Mods" during their senior year. Application standards, such as leadership experience, community service, GPA, or an essay help to develop this tradition. In the approximately 50 new housing projects the authors have contributed to in the last decade, virtually all have included an element of living-learning programming.

- **Faculty-hosted events**, particularly meals in faculty homes. Class dinners or cook-outs are relatively inexpensive and require minimal effort on the part of the faculty member. At the University of Virginia, the student-run Arts and Sciences Council administers funding for faculty-hosted meals. Strong student-faculty relationships encourage a connection to the university and promote independent research initiatives, community involvement, and improved academic participation. Academic departments and the university president's office can underwrite the funding of faculty-student programs. On a large campus, this kind of programming makes the campus feel more intimate and creates a more communal experience.

- **Creative, event-specific publicity** for campus life programs and services. Successful advertising is the foundation for successful programming. Students who are involved in publicity become individual ambassadors of the event. When participation at campus events began to lag, the University of Rhode Island began delivering program announcements to all voice mailboxes in residence halls and on-campus greek houses. At the University of New Hampshire, the student affairs department places bookmarks advertising events under every on-campus student's door. Since then, attendance at concerts and special events has increased dramatically. In addition, college unions can be home to large banners advertising special events. These opportunities should be open to all student organizations.

- **Athletic traditions and competitions** that occur annually. Such traditions need not be connected to a football game. Students at the University of New Hampshire gather to rally around the men's hockey team, whose greatest rival is the University of Maine. These students turn out en masse to "White Out the Whitt," wearing white to the Whittemore hockey arena where the game is played. Free pizza giveaways and pre-game tailgating can encourage participation in indoor sports activities. Activities such as a "Midnight Madness" celebration help generate excitement for the men's and women's sports teams. At "Common Experience" campuses, like Duke University, attendance at certain sports events can be a student tradition. At "Something for Everyone" campuses, such as the University of New Hampshire, the ritual might be observed on a less "religious" scale.

- **Dedicated program or activity time.** "Independent Endeavors" campuses who wish to have more focused, on-campus programming, may need to take special steps to encourage student participation in school-sponsored activities. Institutions that rank the development of student programming initiatives as a high priority reserve certain times for extracurricular development. A campus could designate to student activities one hour per day when class is not in session. Some campuses, such as several in the California system, plan this "Nooner" during a midday lunch hour. Rallies and concerts could also be held during this time. Specialized

program advisors help to make this period more efficient and provide students with access to resources and facilities. This reserved period would help to promote student leadership in general, particularly when today's students are predisposed to spending extra time on schoolwork and employment (Block, 2003).

■ **A focus on late-night and after-hours programming.** The variety of programs inherent to this best practice accommodate the "Something for Everyone" model. At Northeastern University, for example, students can expect a different program every Friday and Saturday night at After Hours, a nonalcoholic performance and social space open until 4 a.m. on the weekend. Late night events are complemented by extended food service hours on central campus, dedicated shuttles to and from central locations, and regular scheduling of events. Weekend pro-

gramming will keep students on campus, and as weekends are a primary time for prospective student visits, a lively campus throughout the week will help attract students who are interested in creative programming.

Understanding that every campus is different, institutions can tailor their specific initiatives depending on the campus life model they wish to follow. They can select and adhere to one of the models just as they would select and adhere to a dedicated campus master plan. For example, an institution that wishes to adhere to the "Common Experience" model might place emphasis on the history, songs, colors, etc. of the institution during its first-year welcome series. That institution could include a portrait of its founder on every page of the university Web site and might incorporate the name of its mascot into the title of its annual athletic competition. Conversely, a campus subscribing to the "Independent Endeavors" model might advertise local restaurants and museums during first-year orientation and encourage students to sign up for

community sports leagues, rather than hosting intramural events on campus.

No one campus life model or singular program is better than any other, and no one campus holds a monopoly on successful campus life. However, deliberate campuses are able to be more systematic in their recruitment and retention by ensuring potential students a certain kind of experience and then delivering that product. In the end, purposeful planning and implementation should make for satisfied students, faculty, and staff and loyal alumni.

References

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