

CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

programming[®]

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SUMMER 2025

**Two Years, Two
Minutes, Too Quick**

**Life Is Change:
Evolving Trends in
Student Activities and
What Comes Next**

**Going Green: Practical
Tips for Sustainable
Events**

**The State of Student
Engagement on
Campus**

**Reflections:
Programming in a
Post-Pandemic World**

**Traditions Live Through
Us: Reviving and
Reimagining Campus
Traditions in Modern
Higher Education**

**Beyond the Board:
Supporting Student
Voices and Visions in
Student Activities**

PLUS:

NACA[®] Achievement Award Winners

NACA[®] Live 2025 Recap

The Case for Campus Activities

Executive Summary

From the Chair

Whew—what a spring! If you're like me, you're just now unclenching your jaw from awards season, late-night events, and watching students walk across the stage like they weren't just in your office two weeks ago asking for snacks and life advice. When that last event wrapped and the tassels turned, I stood still and took my annual "I survived, now give me silence and a smoothie" deep breath.

But here we are—summer. A time to breathe. Reflect. And yes, strategize.

This season offers more than just a moment to exhale; it's a vital opportunity to sharpen our tools and invest in ourselves. Whether you're taking advantage of Summer Essentials, enrolling in one of our Cohorts, or attending one of our immersive Summer Institutes, these professional development offerings aren't only a chance to build your campus activities office and skills; they're also a smart way to engage partners across your campus. Your institutional membership is built for broad campus engagement—a valuable resource and investment just waiting to be fully leveraged.

As we enjoy the energy of summer, the Board of Directors is also laying the groundwork for what's next. Our 2022–2025 strategic plan served as a foundation for meaningful investments in systems, people, and priorities that reflect where higher education is now. Now, we're setting our sights on 2025–2028. As our next chapter calls, we're asking the right questions: What do our members need in a shifting landscape? How do we stay nimble without losing our values? Where do we double down, and where do we evolve?

That work has already begun, and it's work we'll continue to do together.

I'm honored—and hyped—to serve as your Chair of the Board. I look forward to growing, learning, and building alongside each of you as we navigate what's next for our association.

Until then, take that deep breath. And maybe a vacation or a nap, too.



Alicia Bates

nacachair@naca.org

“
Through change, I often find myself looking for community, and have been thankful for the opportunity to find that community through NACA.
”

NACA[®]
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

MISSION

NACA empowers members to amplify the campus experience through inclusive learning, meaningful connections, and engaging entertainment that transforms college communities.

VISION

To create college communities where everyone belongs.

CONTRIBUTORS



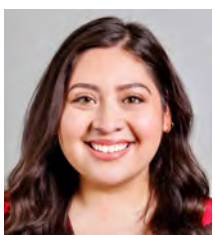
CANDICE WHITE is the Assistant Director of Student Involvement at SUNY Westchester Community College (WCC), where she empowers over 50 student clubs and works with the Westchester Events Board and Student Government Association to foster engagement and advocate for students. With a Master's in College Student Personnel and a Bachelor's in Psychology, Candace is passionate about creating inclusive, high-impact events and building community. She also brings a strong understanding of American Sign Language and accessibility best practices to her role.



GRACE MORGAN is a Project Coordinator for Sustainable Carolina at the University of South Carolina. She is responsible for leading a group of her peers in advancing sustainability efforts on campus through a project team called Green Certification. They serve as consultants to student and staff event planners and are dedicated to reducing environmental, social, and financial costs of campus-wide programs, while using their platform to educate others.



JACKIE WEBER serves as the Director of Student Involvement at Saint Louis University. She is a seasoned professional with over 20 years of service in student engagement, residence life, fraternity/sorority life, and orientation. She has been involved with NACA since 2003, having volunteered at both a regional and national level for many years. The majority of her experience is within the business connections team, having also served as a co-lead at a Programming Board Institute, assisted with the curriculum redesign for PBI, and served as a subject area expert for the Campus Activities Student Affairs Certification through the Higher Education Consortium.



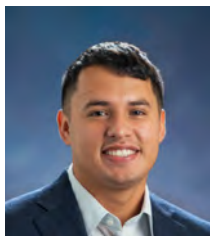
MIMI PEÑA is the Assistant Director of Student Involvement at Dominican University in River Forest, IL, where she primarily supports Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) and is the staff advisor to the Student Government Association. With a strong passion for student development and leadership, she also contributes to campus-wide programming initiatives and is committed to creating meaningful student experiences that foster growth and a sense of belonging. As a newly involved NACA volunteer, Mimi is wrapping up her year as a Leadership Fellow and continuing her service as the Recruitment and Recognition Coordinator for the Mid America Regional Leadership Team.



CRAIG HEITKAMP is the co-founder and President of The College Agency, which he launched with his wife Denise in 2002. Before starting the agency, Craig spent seven years touring nationally as the lead singer and songwriter for the six-member acoustic/rock band Fade 2 Shade. The group was nominated for Music Act of the Year in 2001 and performed at over 800 colleges and universities across 38 states. Fade 2 Shade was also featured in multiple NACA and APCA showcases, including the NACA National Conventions in 2000 and 2002. Today, Craig oversees all aspects of The College Agency's operations.



JESSIE MCNEVIN serves as Grace's supervisor and oversees the student branch of the Office of Sustainability. She loves fostering campus partnerships and looking for opportunities to share resources and collaborate. USC's Gamecock Entertainment & Residence Hall Association have been wonderful partners in Green Certification. We hope these tips can help you implement more sustainable practices in your events!



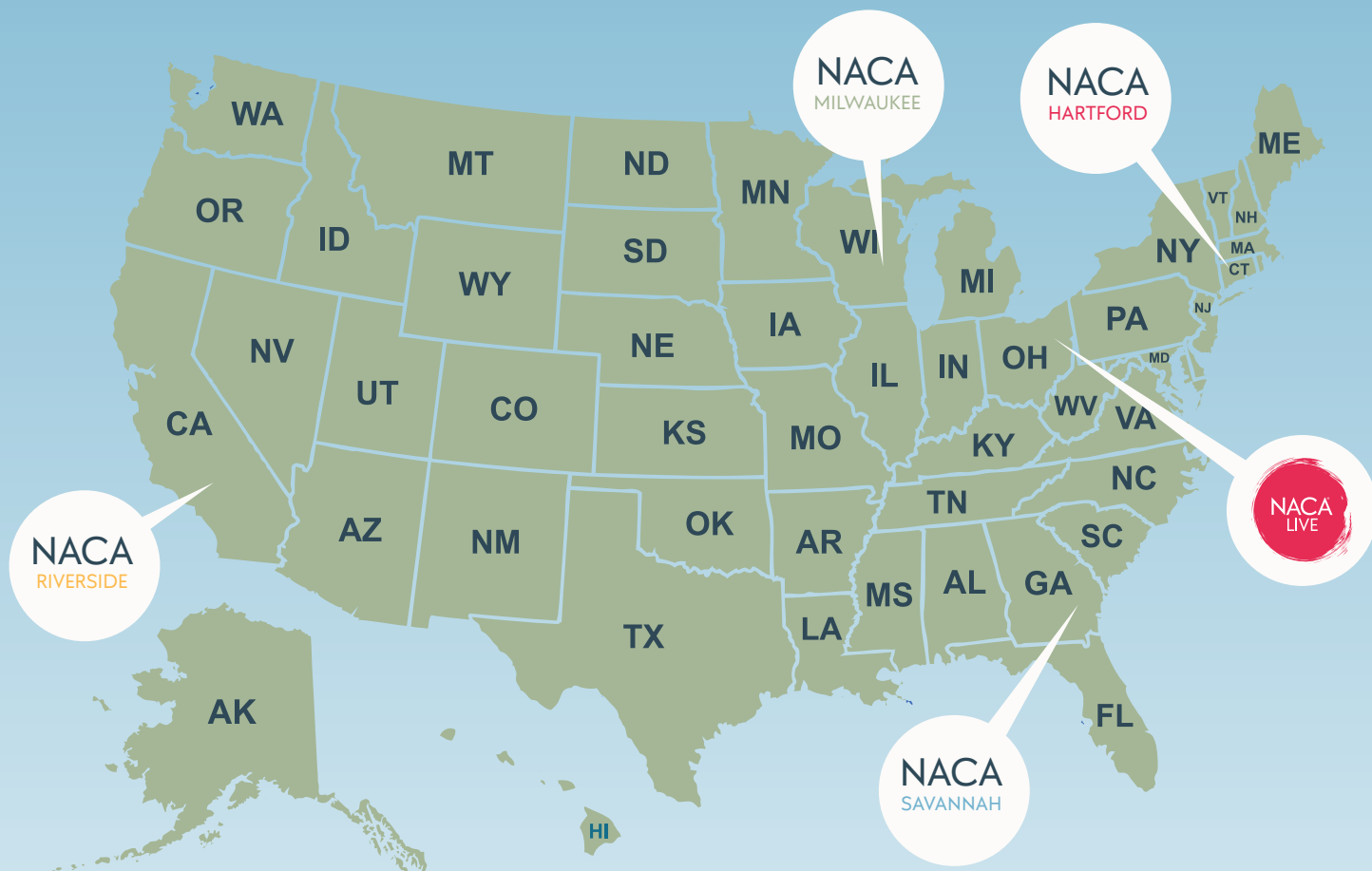
JUAN OLIVO is the Assistant Director of Programming & Civic Engagement at East Texas A&M University, bringing nearly a decade of experience in student development and event planning. He oversees key initiatives like Homecoming, Alternative Breaks, and voter engagement, championing student belonging and inclusive practices. An active NACA member, Juan is also pursuing a doctorate in Higher Education, researching student involvement and belonging for students of color.



SWANK MOTION PICTURES, INC. is a trusted partner in campus entertainment and engagement. We provide public performance licensing for movies and innovative programming tools to help colleges create fun, inclusive events. For over 85 years, Swank has helped campuses nationwide use movies and TV shows to build community – offering everything from the latest Hollywood releases to interactive screening experiences that bring students together.

Interested in bringing nostalgic, gamified, and inclusive movie events to your campus? Contact us at bit.ly/Swank-NACA.

NACA's 2025-26 Event Schedule



CONFERENCES

NACA SavannahOct. 2-4, 2025
 NACA HartfordOct. 16-18, 2025

NACA Riverside..... Nov. 20-22, 2025
 NACA Milwaukee.....April 9-11, 2026

NACA® LIVE 2026
 Columbus, OH • Feb. 13-16

REMINDER:
 Schools get ONE COMPLIMENTARY
 CONFERENCE REGISTRATION to Savannah,
 Hartford, Riverside or Milwaukee!



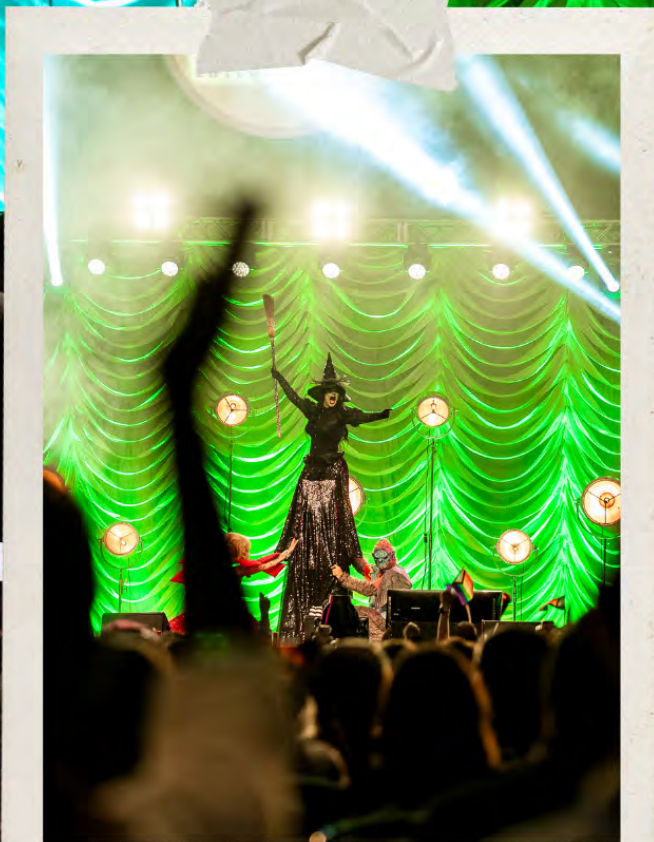
NACA LIVE RECAP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN SKROCKI, NACA









NACA Live 2025











For a full album
of our NACA Live
2025 photos,
click [here](#)





Members—Help Spread the Word!

Tell prospective members how your NACA membership has benefited you. Share NACA's social media posts and refer potential members to naca.org/join. Questions? Contact memberrelations@naca.org for more information.

What's In It For Me?

Recruit one new member and receive:

One free registration to a NACA event of your choice.*

Recognition in Campus Activities Programming® magazine.

Recruit 3+ new members and add on one of the following:

One free registration to a NACA event of your choice.*

One year of membership (of your current level).

How Do I Amplify? Submit a referral form at naca.org/amplify

*Visit naca.org/amplify for terms and conditions.

AMPLIFY HIGHLIGHT!



DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Huge Shout-Out to DePaul University for their incredible work with the NACA Amplify program! Thanks to their referrals, we've welcomed new members into the NACA community. This is what collaboration looks like – empowering more campus professionals to thrive!

Chair, NACA Board of Directors

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Amber Shaverdi Huston, CAE

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Jameson Root, CAE

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Stephen Skrocki

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Two Years, Two Minutes, Too Quick

by Candice White



At SUNY Westchester Community College (SUNY WCC), I have quickly learned that programming at a four-year institution, and programming at a two-year community college requires a shift in perspective. Event planning at a community college is not just focused on activities and logistics, it is about timing, flexibility, and an ability to meet students where they are in their day-to-day hectic schedules

Time and Money

At a community college, students are busy! While their commitment to their education soaks up a lot of their time, the many titles they hold outside of the classroom deeply impacts how they navigate each day. Students at SUNY WCC are also siblings, caregivers, workers, friends, veterans, athletes, student leaders, and so much more. This means that timing, accessibility, and relevance are everything in event planning.

Programming during common hours, or earlier in the day helps to ensure our students are being engaged without sacrificing their responsibilities. While most of our events happen during the day, there are some events that run into the evening. These events often conclude around 6:00 pm due to class and bus schedules.

Another challenge to community colleges is finances. While budgets can often be a problem at both four year and two-year institutions, the adaptability to do more with less is often a central theme at community colleges. Financial barriers also impact our students. Over 34% of the student population receives a Pell grant, over 60% have utilized our campus pantry, and over 20% have identified as first generation. Knowing these outside factors helps community college

professionals and programmers succeed in meeting students along their paths toward education with a bit of fun along the way!

Different Approaches

This year our activities board has approached engagement not just through social media and flyers, but through intentional student-centered approaches, one on one communications, and assessment. Our activities board went out into the campus community and did something called “street marketing” for each event.

Street marketing is one-way programmers increase engagement and attendance at events. Each programmer would walk around with small flyers about an upcoming event happening that day and invite students to attend. These personal touches led to greater attendance

Another initiative that led to success was through programming surveys. Each programming chair created surveys that allowed students to select program topics, as well as ask students for their ideas. With this in mind, programmers were able to combine the student voice and student interest into making some memorable events.

Purposeful Engaging Programming

At SUNY WCC, we have learned to build events around our students’ needs: relevance, accessibility, connection, and of course having fun! Here are our top programming highlights that have resonated most with our community college population: advocacy and civic engagement, off-campus trips, make and takes, and animals.

Advocacy & Civic Engagement

With the many obstacles our students face outside of SUNY WCC, their resilience and empathy make them want to serve as change agents and advocates for the communities they identify with. This year, with the help of a SUNY grant, we were able to do more programming around advocacy and civic engagement. During National Voter Registration Week, we launched a "Golf Cart Trivia" initiative that brought the event to students. As programmers and professionals drove around campus, we asked students questions about the upcoming presidential election and handed them voter registration resources. Through this event, we engaged with over 500 students and learned the fears that were lingering in our community. This helped shape a second event called, "There's Nothing Scary About Voting."

As a Hispanic- and Multicultural-Serving Institution, we listened when students, especially those from Hispanic, LGBTQIA+, and undocumented backgrounds shared their fears about the upcoming election. In response to these fears, we created a Halloween-themed event where students could vote for their favorite candy, play trivia, and gather resources about voting,

This event then led to a Spring initiative where our Student Government created "Red Cards." A card designed to help undocumented individuals, and allies navigate interactions with law enforcement and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. By placing these cards in pockets on bulletin boards, students were able to grab "red cards" that explained their rights in both English and Spanish making them both accessible by proximity and language.

Off-Campus Trips

Being located only 45 minutes from New York City provides us with many opportunities to connect with a variety of entertainment venues. This year's trips included visits to museums, sporting events, and even a Broadway show. Although many students have grown up in the area, they often have not had the opportunity to attend these types of events. The success behind the trips was in the intentionality of removing three common community college student barriers: transportation, financial stress and food insecurity. Each trip includes transportation to and from the venue, a meal, and a ticket into the venue at a lower cost. This intentional programming led to every trip selling out this academic term!

Make and Takes

Opportunities like stuff-a-plush, care kits, and crafting events allow students an opportunity to create while connecting. Many times, these events are taking place during class breaks, or gaps in bus schedules. Having an opportunity to intentionally pause and spend time creating is not just fun but needed for the constant on the go community college student. By creating opportunities for students to use that

time in a unique way, it allows us the opportunity to connect them to student programming and other students in the community. It also provides students with an opportunity to gain access to items they may be in need of.

Animals

Whether it was a pig, kangaroo, or a therapy dog our events with animals consistently draw a large crowd of students. With hundreds of students in attendance, each student not only gets to interact and learn about the animals, but we often see a sense of community being built. Students are talking while waiting in line and asking each other to take photos of them with the animals. It creates a low-risk environment where students have a shared interest, an opportunity to de-stress, and meet their peers.

What isn't working

The opposite can be said about programming where student attendance is lacking. Programs that require students to sit and listen without interactions for an extended amount of time have not been a success for our community college. Programming such as lectures, comedy shows, or traditional speaker series often fall flat. The one exception to this is our academic clubs. Academic clubs that bring in speakers about how to advance in their career will bring about a higher attendance than programming speakers. One reason for this is the four-year vs two-year student mindset. In two short years, community college students need to focus on "what is next." That means landing internships, jobs, or transferring to another institution in just two short years. This drive to succeed quickly dictates everything they choose to do while at SUNY WCC. While they may not sit for a comedian, they will actively choose to attend a series on how to develop into a better business owner, nurse, or learn how to become a highly sought after employee. Every choice they make about whether or not to attend deeply impacts their academic and personal needs.

Final Thoughts

While programming may look different at a community college, the intentionality for our students serves as a reminder of why we do what we do in Campus Activities. Two years might not sound like a long time, but in the world of community college programming, it serves as a reminder that to make an impact you do not always need a lot of time or money. In two minutes, a student can grab a slice of pizza, information about a cause, or even register to vote. In two hours, they can meet a kangaroo, build a care kit, and talk to a stranger who might eventually become a friend.

Life Is Change

Evolving Trends in Student Activities and What Comes Next

by

Craig Heitkamp



A good friend and longtime client of mine has a keynote speech titled “Life is Change.” Honestly, I don’t think there’s ever been a more accurate statement, especially if you’ve worked in higher ed or student activities over the past 25 years.

I got my start in student programming back in 1994 as a member of the University Program Board (UPB) at my alma mater, St. Cloud State University in central Minnesota. Back then, life was simpler. The Internet was barely part of everyday life, emails were still something of a novelty, and seeing someone using a cell phone was like spotting a unicorn. On campus, our coffeehouse venue was a regular hub for acoustic musicians, comedians, and spoken word performers. The programming schedule was jam packed with performers and events, and it didn’t take much to get students to leave the confines of their dorm room and venture out onto campus for UPB’s events.

Then I graduated and my life took an interesting turn. Rather than starting my first job, the band my friends and I had formed in college was signed to a record label. We jumped headfirst into the college entertainment scene performing at campuses all over the country. Thanks to my UPB background, I already understood the student activities market, which gave us a big advantage. We found success

quickly in the NACA circuit and rode that wave until we officially hung up our instruments in 2002.

From the Stage to the Agency

During my last couple of years as a touring musician, my wife and I founded The College Agency, a booking agency focused on representing the musicians and entertainers we had come to know during my years on the road. We started small but grew steadily over the next several years. What we offered then looked a lot like what most colleges wanted: music, comedy, spoken word, and variety acts.

We eventually expanded our roster to include names like Javier Colon (winner of The Voice Season 1), comedian Theo Von, and Justin Vernon (later known for Bon Iver). Our mission was clear: to help colleges find solid, high-quality entertainment that would fit within their programming models. And for a long time, the market was incredibly consistent. Every year brought a new batch of student leaders, but the types of events they were looking to book didn’t change much.

Then came YouTube. And Facebook. And the iPhone. Suddenly, everything began to shift—fast.

Digital Disruption

The arrival of these digital platforms changed the entire landscape. Students no longer had to leave the comforts of their dorm room to experience life and be entertained. They had access to millions of videos, songs, and comedy clips at the tap of a screen. This changed the game for live entertainment on campus.

Cultural awareness also encompassed our daily vernacular. Diversity and inclusion became central conversations. What used to pass as acceptable content in a comedy set suddenly didn't feel appropriate anymore. I remember the first time one of our comedians had their online content flagged before being booked. That had never happened before, but it quickly became standard practice to investigate the online history of prospective entertainers.

We realized that the old formula of "book what's fun" wasn't enough anymore. Students—and their advisors—were looking more closely at messaging, tone, and representation. So, we adjusted. We made sure our roster reflected those values and that we were offering programming that aligned with what campuses cared about.

Tightening Budgets, Shifting Position

Around 2015, we started hearing a common theme from our college clients. They were being asked to do more with less. Budget cuts were becoming more frequent and professional staff were taking on additional roles across campus. This started to impact student activities directly. Suddenly, it simply wasn't financially possible to have a consistent weekly schedule of musicians, comedians, and spoken word artists.

By 2018, another layer was added; the cost of bringing performers to campus. Travel, hotels, and meals had gone up significantly, while student activities budgets had only increased marginally, if at all. That mismatch forced schools to get creative. We saw more programming boards trimming their calendars, eliminating some traditional programs, and focusing their dollars on a few key dates.

So, we pivoted too. In 2019, our agency began focusing heavily on low-cost programming options that could reach more students per dollar. Make-and-take events, DIY programs, and interactive experiences started to become some of our key offerings. At the same time, we started to notice something else. Attendance at traditional live shows, especially for smaller music acts, poets, and even some comedians, was starting to wane.

Then Came COVID

2020 arrived like a wrecking ball. The pandemic didn't just disrupt student activities, it flattened it.

The trends we had been slowly tracking for years? COVID put

them in overdrive. Students' reliance on their smartphones and digital entertainment skyrocketed. In-person events stopped overnight, and schools scrambled to pivot to virtual programming. The industry norms we had all counted on for years got tossed out the window.

But because we had already been shifting our approach, we were in a good position to adapt. We had seen the rise of DIY programming. We had already been experimenting with make-and-take kits that could be shipped directly to students. And we had begun thinking about student activities more from a needs-based approach than a wants-based approach.

We stopped asking, "Which act do we enjoy the most?" and started asking, "How many students will this engage—and how deeply?" We talked less about our personal likes and dislikes and more about the student engagement per dollar spent ratio. We started tracking trends by watching social media; religiously following the social media accounts of programming boards, collecting data on what programs were being scheduled on campus, and making special notes of the home-grown programs that creative programming boards were developing independently.

Data Drives Everything

We became obsessed with data. We compared our internal requests to the annual NACA school member survey. We looked at trends in programming requests, attendance numbers, and the types of events getting shared on social media. What we saw confirmed what we were already feeling—interactive programs were winning. Traditional "sit and watch" entertainment was losing steam.

And it wasn't just anecdotal. At NACA conferences, we noticed fewer entertainment agencies in attendance. The ones that were there? They were not as busy as they used to be. Meanwhile, the booths offering novelties, make-and-take kits, or rentals were slammed with traffic. It was clear that the model was changing.

The One-To-Many Exception: The Major Concert

Interestingly, there was a one-to-many entertainment model that was thriving—the major concert. As a musician in the late 1990s, I had opened for national acts at countless college campuses. I was very aware of the major concerts that many institutions liked to produce in the spring as the weather improved and the school year came to an end. With that said, social media certainly increased the importance of the major concert on campus. In a world where image and online presence matter, these high-visibility events gained momentum.

Let's be honest. What high school senior doesn't get excited when they hear a prospective college brought in some up-and-coming artist for their Springfest concert?

What Comes Next?

So where do we go from here? If the last five years have taught us anything, it's that change is constant. And it's accelerating.

We're heading into the predicted "enrollment cliff," a significant drop in the number of high school graduates entering college, especially in the Midwest and Northeast. Some states may avoid the worst of it, but others will be hit hard. Fewer students means tighter budgets. Tighter budgets mean even more pressure on student activities professionals to deliver meaningful engagement with fewer resources.

In that kind of environment, every dollar counts.

The Mission Moving Forward

At The College Agency, our goal has always been to help schools create a sense of belonging on campus. That's still our mission, but how we achieve it is evolving.

It starts with understanding students today, not who they were five or ten years ago. We see what resonates now: experiences that feel personal, inclusive, and interactive. Participation is a must. We see students smiling at our make-and-take stations. We hear the laughter during variety shows where their peers go on stage. We witness the impact of our wellness programs and speakers who can meet students where they are emotionally and mentally.

Navigating all this isn't about guessing what will work. It's about listening, observing, and acting with intention. It's like tuning an engine. You don't just push buttons and hope it runs. You listen. You adjust. You fine-tune.

Because, at the end of the day, life is change. And if we embrace that, rather than resist it, we'll be ready for whatever comes next.



NACA[®] 24/7

**Find, review, and book artists from your
computer or mobile device
anytime, anywhere!**



Going Green: Practical Tips for Sustainable Events

by Grace Morgan & Jessie McNevin

Campus events are integral to the college experience, creating a sense of community through student interactions and engagement. Students flock to on-campus concerts, sporting events, outdoor yoga, movie nights, and more. As you prepare for another semester full of activities and opportunities, I encourage you to consider how to utilize practical and innovative approaches to improve the sustainability of events and use your platform to educate others on the importance of thoughtful planning. Consider the following five categories and see what changes you can make.

Marketing and Communications

In the past, marketing was primarily physical—coupons were sent in the mail and fliers hung on bulletin boards. However, today, we have shifted greatly toward digital marketing; emails and posts on social media have completely changed the game. Although it may seem like a small act, engaging in digital marketing has a huge impact on the sustainability of your event.

By going paperless for your marketing, you can save a pound of paper waste per 100 fliers (Wiley, 2023). Instead of printing the fliers, save pounds of waste and post your marketing to social media accounts. Not only is it more time and cost-efficient, it cuts back on unnecessary waste, too.

If physical marketing is crucial to your event, try only posting fliers in highly trafficked areas. Once the event is over, collect the fliers and recycle them to help mitigate landfill waste. Another strategy is to promote several events on one paper flier, like a calendar. If you distribute calendars or paper fliers, include a “please recycle me” message on them to encourage others to be responsible with their waste. As a bonus, it’s also worth printing your marketing on 100% post-consumer recycled or Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified paper.

As for signage, try to use generic language so that it can be reused. For instance, having a sign that says “Orientation This Way” with an arrow instead of “Orientation is in Room 101”. Next year’s event planners will thank you for making preparation easier!

Energy Consumption

The easiest way to reduce energy consumption at events is to be deliberate. Turn off lights and unplug other electronics that are not being used, and leave the event space as you found it. In general, try to be considerate of your energy and water consumption. Act as a role model to other students and organizations on campus and avoid irresponsible uses of energy and water like inflatables or water balloons. Instead, opt for more sustainable sources of entertainment like games, raffles, crafting, cooking classes, movie nights, and more.

If you're hosting an off-campus event like a night at the zoo, roller-skating, bowling, or an escape room, try to arrange shuttles for attendees. If possible, encourage public transportation, carpooling, and walking to events. Sometimes, finding a ride or walking in an area you may not be familiar with can be daunting. Including instructions for accessing transportation and noting how long the walk will take can help garner support for the idea.

Swag and Freebies

Let's be honest—everyone loves free things. It's hard to not want all the free swag from events, especially when some of it may memorialize your time at college; but, I challenge you to consider the impact of your event's swag. How does it enhance the experience? Is it sustainably sourced? How does it align with your, and the university's, ethical values? Will it be able to be reused over and over, or will it more likely end up in the landfill?

If swag is important to the event, or it enhances the experience greatly, brainstorm ways to make it as usable as possible. Instead of giving out hats, t-shirts, tote bags, or anything of the like with a very specific phrase or date on it, try to make it more timeless. Consider what people will want to wear and use five years from now. It can be helpful to use more general language like your university or organization's name or logo rather than a specific event title.

Additionally, you may use swag as an incentive to reduce overconsumption. Instead of handing everyone a shirt, have it so that if they complete a checklist of items or meet certain criteria, they can be rewarded with swag. For example, you may earn a hat by visiting 10 tables at the student organization fair. This allows people who do want the swag to still be able to have it but may deter others who are not as passionate about having it.

Another way to make your swag more sustainable is to incorporate it into an activity at your event. Hosting craft nights—think: canvas painting, tie-dyeing t-shirts, making candles, etc.—is a great way to easily make it so that the swag and the event activity are intertwined. This way, attendees get to take something meaningful home with them, and it's less likely to end up in the trash down the road. An even more elevated way to go about this is a “bring-your-own” situation. Host an upcycling workshop where attendees bring clothes they already have, and learn how to repair them. Have attendees bring something they want to paint or tie-dye, and offer lessons. Offer the dry ingredients for a baked good or hot chocolate, and have attendees bring a container to take home and make later. Host a flower-pressing workshop and have attendees bring flowers or items to press them on. The list goes on and on!

If swag is not as important to the event, offer coupons and vouchers, or host a raffle. This could be tickets to a local baseball game, a free Wendy's Frosty, a gift card, and much more. This is a good way to incentivize attendance while

preventing buying an excess amount of new things.

And at the end of the day, it's important to consider how sustainable and ethical your swag is. Try to only give items that are going to be used over and over again. Most people have their own water bottles that they prefer, so giving out water bottles with your logo or name isn't the most efficient use of resources.

Give out items that are durable and less likely to break or tear. Think about where items are sourced from; support small and local businesses when you can.

Check out Post-Landfill Action Network's Hierarchical Ethical Guide to Swag for more considerations (Post-Landfill Action Network, 2018)



Food-Related Waste

Mitigating waste at your event is one of the most impactful things you can do. According to the EPA, landfills in the United States released about 119.8 million metric tons of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere in 2022. This is over 17% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the United States (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024). To help reduce this, it is extremely important to be conscious of what we are tossing out and think of other options.

If you are having food at the event, there are a few main things to keep in mind: what the food is, what it's coming in or being served on, and how the food will be disposed of. Offering compost bins at the event can be extremely helpful in diverting waste. When ordering food, think about offering vegetarian and vegan options. Not only will this help avoid conflicts with dietary restrictions, but it's also more

sustainable. In general, vegetarian options use less land, water, and pesticides. For instance, producing beef takes approximately 8–14 times more resources than growing beans (Fresán & Sabaté, 2019).

Also as you plan, try to opt for washable and reusable materials, like reusable dishes and cutlery over single-use. If this is not possible, but you can compost industrially, try to find compostable dishes. If this is still not possible, try to encourage attendees to bring a container, or offer finger foods to reduce the amount of plates/bowls and cutlery needed. If you offer napkins as an alternative to single-use plates, you can compost them after use.

For the food itself, any waste that is left on someone's plate should be composted. If you can, implement a plan beforehand for any leftovers. You may be able to recover the leftover food and donate it to your campus pantry or a local charity.

Other single-use plastics should also be avoided. Don't offer plastic straws, stir sticks, creamer cups, etc. Instead, think about options that can be disposed of more responsibly, like wooden stir sticks that can be composted, or creamer in a carton that can be recycled.

Physical Waste

Mitigating other waste sources offers a chance to be resourceful and innovative.

For consumable items, offer well-labeled recycling bins for the set-up process and the event itself. It is just as important to recycle any cardboard packaging that event supplies come in as it is to recycle the cans that people are drinking from during the event.

In the same vein, if you are not providing reusable materials at your event, try to offer materials that can at least be recycled or composted. For instance, aluminum cans are preferable over plastic bottles. Aluminum is infinitely recyclable and can take as little as 60 days to be back on the shelf, whereas plastic bottles are harder to recycle and cannot go through the process nearly as much (Aluminum Association, 2021).

For decorations, use items that you already have, or be creative! Make flower vases out of soda bottles, celebrate with leaf confetti, or hang flower or fruit garlands. Shop at thrift stores and charity shops for anything to elevate your space—baskets, tablecloths, candles, etc. For activities, opt for digital versions of trivia and games

Conclusion

Considering sustainability in your event planning is a challenge, but it is a worthwhile one! Campus events and activities are there to make a positive impact on the student experience. By considering these five sustainability areas, you are also practicing futuristic thinking and considering the impact on your local community and planet. Let's aim for positive impacts all around!

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2025 NACA Achievement Award Winners



**Regina Young Hyatt, Ph.D.,
Mississippi State University**
Founders Award



**Scott Talarico
Neon Entertainment**
Campus Legend Award



**Sundas Shahid, Loyola
University Chicago (IL)**
C. Shaw Smith Outstanding
New Professional Award



**Jill Wulfenstein, University of
Rochester (NY)**
Patsy Morley Outstanding
Programmer Award



**Eva Sager, Pittsburg
State University (KS)**
Frank Harris Outstanding
Student Government
Advisor Award



Grant Winslow
Lifetime Membership Award



**BlackP.R.I.N.T., University of
Louisiana at Lafayette**
Outstanding Diversity
Achievement Award
Campus Program



**Jarrick Brown, University of
Colorado at Denver**
Legacy Award



Reflections: Programming in a Post-Pandemic World

by Jackie Weber

Five years ago, campus activities professionals were sitting at home, staring at a computer screen, working from basements, bedrooms, or home offices. Our days were filled with Zoom meetings, and we desperately attempted to make connections in a two-dimensional world. It was a time where we certainly had more questions than answers, and were encouraged to find comfort in the unknown. Everyone overused words like “unprecedented,” and “pivot,” and we became experts at differentiating “quarantining” from “isolation.”

While we were working from our home office, it became very easy to be siloed in our work. Although cross disciplinary teams were pulled together to solve larger campus issues and debate COVID policies while prioritizing health and safety of campus communities, it seems we were on a deserted island. It was challenging to maintain robust and reciprocal campus programming partnerships, planning events while following national, local and campus safety protocols. To be certain, everyone’s job shifted during this season. So, it’s quite likely that cross-campus peers didn’t pay attention to campus programming while they were learning how to offer health services virtually, rewriting lesson plans for asynchronous learning, or reviewing housing contracts for breaking social distancing rules.

When the gates to gathering opened (slowly, at first), it almost felt like everyone had forgotten what engagement was...how it looked...WHY we did it. During our first post-

pandemic in-person event with inflatables, panic ensued on my campus when a campus partner grew concerned we wouldn’t remember to anchor inflatable attractions. While we did assure everyone the inflatables would NOT fly off of our three-story parking garage, it was evident that everyone forgot basic elements of programming.

While this wasn’t entirely a bad thing if you’re in need of breaking bad programming habits or sunseting outdated “traditions,” it was quite the challenge when a full cycle of student leaders didn’t have an opportunity to plan an in-person event.

How was this five years ago? It feels like a whole separate lifetime, while simultaneously feeling like it was yesterday. Does anyone else find themselves measuring time as pre-COVID and post-COVID? It’s no surprise that the pandemic has impacted how we do our work, in both good and challenging ways. The landscape of campus programming, student engagement and belonging has changed significantly. Student engagement was essentially redefined. Today it seems that the term and concept of engagement is more important than ever. Other campus staff are looking at us to be the experts in building community... with a generation of students who experienced minimal engagement during a critically important portion of their childhood. They don’t know how to engage, they don’t know if they want to engage, and their risk averse selves might not take the bait.

Emerging from the pandemic felt like a multi-tiered and monumental effort. For nearly two years, activities professionals were advised to have a plan, with a contingency plan, and an emergency contingency plan in case chaos ensued. I recall trying to plan orientation for nearly 1600 new students in the fall of 2020 being advised to plan for programming with no restrictions, plan for an entirely virtual experience, and plan for a hybrid version of the two. As we opened our respective campuses in the fall of 2021, we perhaps had a bit more guidance but were still advised to have multiple options until being told how to structure engagement.

In hindsight, sometimes I wonder if our success, as a profession, to pivot on a dime and execute successful programs in unprecedented times (see what I did there?!), has demonstrated we don't necessarily NEED a calendar year to plan a successful event. During the pandemic, we did it with weeks...sometimes days...of notice. Did we manifest our own destiny? Has our ability to produce high quality programs on a compressed timeline become our new norm? Now it seems every part of our programming process is on the same compressed timeline...selecting events, engaging associates, making a booking decision, signing contracts. Literally everything. Will we ever return to the model of doing things a year in advance? I'd settle for a term at a time.

During the pandemic, institutional leaders were asking us to do something, anything, to encourage our open campuses to get students out of the confines of their bedroom to participate in safe and controlled programs. However, we had social distancing guidelines, possible facility restrictions, and programs outside in open air environments were always more safe. Sounds like a great opportunity for make-and-takes, do-it-yourself (DIY) programs, and giveaways. So that's what we did, and that's what many of our associate members provided. We became very skilled at "drop in" programming, and students loved it. Today's students still love it.

You know what else changed significantly during the pandemic: social media. If only I would have had the foresight to become a content creator in March of 2020, I might have become an influencer and you would know me from the other side of our association...as an associate. What happens when the world is on lockdown, experiencing cabin fever and baking banana bread? Everyone becomes a social media star, and in turn, social media sites become a rabbit hole of content, and we seem to consume this content for hours each day. If many of us did this as grown adults, imagine how much our country's youth consumed? Today's students were in virtual primary and secondary school...sort of...by day, and endlessly scrolling social media for entertainment by night.

Does this impact today's campus programming? I believe so. Pre-pandemic it was easier to gather students to watch an up-and-coming or unknown mentalist, for entertainment, shock, and awe. Post-pandemic, it's a gamble to plan something that isn't consumable on social media, because students have already seen several other mentalists they KNOW are amazing; and if they aren't coming to your campus, students

might not leave their rooms. Or, better yet, if you are in a region which experiences all the seasons, students might not leave their room during a winter storm to see the up-and-coming mentalist, when they can watch all of the artist's best work on Tik Tok.

On a general level, once we got past the fear of a pandemic and mechanisms were created to help the world engage in safe ways, several other positive trends emerged. I know I certainly felt the invitation to be more creative and innovative in my work. What once seemed impossible was no longer. In a space where technology needs and demands evolve, it seemed like we were keeping up with the evolution. Let's face it, if everyone had to work and learn at home for an extended period of time, brilliant technology minds created brilliant technology resources. And, if everyone needed them, they were a bit more accessible for all. Now, we know we CAN be campus engagement professionals in a virtual or hybrid environment. It's allowed me to engage with students throughout the summer holiday while pre-pandemic, I likely wouldn't "meet" with students. If you work for an institution with satellite campuses, new opportunities are now available for streaming, or virtual engagement. The creative and new engagement opportunities we create can possibly be offered as part of recruitment and enrollment strategies.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also offer space to acknowledge the significant challenges faced by colleges and universities during the pandemic. Leaders had to make difficult decisions related to health and safety, or decisions about budget and personnel. Many people across the world made personal decisions to leave jobs or change careers. Several decided to relocate due to family obligations or interests. Each of us had to make impossible choices that best served us and our loved ones in the moment. Our field lost talented, seasoned professionals for reasons beyond anyone's true control. Concurrently, as a profession we also worked to recruit and cultivate a new group of professionals to continue the work. While we're focusing on how the pandemic impacted programming, it's important to note that it also impacted us as people on a basic, human level.

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Traditions Live Through Us: Reviving and Reimagining Campus Traditions in Modern Higher Education

by Juan Olivo

Campus traditions are a powerful component of student identity, belonging, and institutional culture. Yet, as colleges and universities face policy constraints, shifting demographics, and evolving student interests, many long-standing traditions risk becoming obsolete. This article explores a case study from East Texas A&M University (ETAMU), where student affairs professionals revitalized dormant traditions and created new ones that align with modern values and student needs. By connecting theory to practice, we demonstrate how traditions can be redefined as high-impact practices that foster engagement, collaboration, and community.

The Role of Tradition in Modern Higher Education

In the ever-changing landscape of higher education, campus traditions can serve as anchors of stability and identity. For students, particularly those navigating the complexities of belonging at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), traditions provide meaningful practices that connect them to the larger campus narrative. However, sustaining traditions in today's higher education environment presents its own challenges. Budget

reductions, staff shortages, legislative restrictions, and shifting student priorities all threaten the survival of these cultural touchstones.

Traditions, when intentionally designed and inclusive, can serve as high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008). They create opportunities for collaboration, leadership, civic engagement, and cultural affirmation. As higher education professionals, it is incumbent upon us to reimagine traditions in ways that resonate with current and future students.

Context and Challenges: Reimagining Tradition for Modern Student Buy-In

East Texas A&M University (ETAMU), a regional public institution with a student population of approximately 13,000, has undergone significant changes in recent years. With a history of eight name changes and transitions in leadership and identity, ETAMU is no stranger to institutional evolution. In recent years, the university faced multiple disruptions: the implementation of Texas Senate Bill 17 (SB-17), departmental closures, and a reduction in student affairs staff. These challenges forced the Office of Student Engagement (OSE) to absorb multiple responsibilities while maintaining its commitment to high-impact student experiences.

In response to these challenges and in recognition of shifting student engagement trends, the OSE recognized a critical need: to reenergize campus traditions to foster deeper student buy-in and community connection. Rather than viewing traditions as static remnants of the past, OSE staff initiated a proactive strategy titled Traditions Live Through Us. This initiative aimed to reassess, refresh, and reintroduce campus traditions in ways that are accessible, inclusive, and relevant to today's diverse student body.

Reviving Tradition: From Operation Blue & Gold to the BIG Event

One of the first traditions to undergo transformation was "Operation Blue & Gold," a campus clean-up initiative that had experienced declining student interest. Recognizing the need for a broader, more impactful experience, the OSE team aligned their efforts with a national model—"The BIG Event"—a day of community service implemented by universities across the country.

By rebranding and expanding the initiative, ETAMU saw dramatic improvements:

- Over 300 students registered to participate
- Participation from 7 athletic teams and 36 student organizations
- Engagement from local businesses and residents at 30 off-campus sites
- Alumni and dignitary involvement
- A celebratory event called "One BIG Party" to close out the day

This transformation illustrates how traditions, when aligned with civic engagement and community partnership, can become vehicles for student development and town-gown relations.

A Strategic Framework for Tradition Building

The success of "The BIG Event" was not accidental. It followed a strategic, replicable process that can inform similar efforts at other institutions:

1. Assess the Tradition: Evaluate historical relevance, student interest, and institutional alignment. Use surveys, focus groups, and event data to determine what worked and what did not.
2. Define the Purpose: Articulate the core values or goals of the tradition. What is its cultural significance? Why does it matter today?
3. Rebrand with Intention: If needed, update the name, visuals, and messaging. The rebrand should be student-centered and culturally relevant.
4. Get Creative with Marketing: Leverage storytelling, social media, countdowns, and student voices. Meet students where they are.
5. Collaborate and Delegate: Build cross-campus

partnerships and empower student leaders to co-create and co-lead.

6. Reflect and Improve: Collect post-event feedback and assess impact. Use this data to iterate and grow the tradition over time.

These steps are deeply aligned with student development theories, including Tinto's model of integration and Chickering and Reisser's vectors of identity development. Traditions, when meaningfully constructed, serve as identity-affirming experiences that enhance student retention, especially for marginalized populations.

The Victory Bell: Tangible Symbols and Cultural Continuity

Another success story from ETAMU involves the revival of the Victory Bell—the oldest historical artifact on campus. Originally used in 1889 to signal the start of each semester, the bell was retired in 1927. Recognizing its symbolic potential, the OSE team brought it back in the form of handheld bells distributed to student leaders during the Lion Walk, a campus welcome event.

These bells quickly became a coveted tradition. Students touch the original Victory Bell at the start of the semester, and receive their handheld Victory Bell symbolizing a fresh beginning. Surveys revealed that students, especially first-years, deeply valued this tangible connection to campus history. By rooting new experiences in historical artifacts, ETAMU created an intergenerational bridge between past and present. The handheld Victory Bell allows students to customize it to represent their story at ETAMU and bring to any and all events as loud & proud ETAMU Lions.

This approach reflects the power of ritual, which, according to anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), functions as a liminal experience that marks transitions and creates communal identity. In the context of higher education, such rituals help students internalize their belonging to the institution

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Traditions are not static relics but dynamic practices that must evolve alongside institutional and student transformation. From a theoretical standpoint, traditions intersect with several core areas of higher education practice:

- Student Belonging and Retention: As Strayhorn (2012) notes, belonging is a critical factor in student success. Inclusive traditions serve as onboarding tools that embed students into the social fabric of the institution.
 - In a post-SB-17 landscape where DEI programs face political scrutiny, traditions offer an alternative pathway to affirm cultural identity and community. By decentralizing ownership and engaging diverse voices, traditions can uphold DEI values even when formal structures are under threat.
- High-Impact Practices (HIPs): As identified by Kuh (2008), experiential learning, service projects, and collaborative assignments are essential for deep learning. Reimagined traditions can function as HIPs when structured with intention and reflection.
- Town-Gown Relations: Traditions like The BIG Event foster mutually beneficial relationships with local communities, enhancing the institution's civic role and public image.

Recommendations for Practitioners

For student affairs professionals seeking to preserve or reinvent traditions on their campuses, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Start with Purpose: Clarify the "why" behind each tradition. Is it about unity? Service? Identity? Build from that core.
2. Engage Students Early: Co-create with students, not for them. Ownership increases participation and longevity.
3. Be Willing to Let Go: Some traditions may no longer serve your student body. Be open to retiring outdated practices in favor of more inclusive ones.
4. Integrate Assessment: Use both qualitative and quantitative methods to track engagement and impact.
5. Celebrate Milestones: Embed rituals within broader events (e.g., convocation, homecoming) to amplify their reach.
6. Secure Administrative Buy-in: Frame tradition-building as a retention and engagement strategy backed by research.

Keeping Tradition Alive in a New Era

In a time when higher education faces cultural, political, and structural shifts, campus traditions remain a vital instrument for building identity, fostering engagement, and sustaining community. The work done at East Texas A&M University illustrates how traditions, when revitalized with care and strategy, can thrive even under constraint.

As professionals committed to holistic student development, we must see tradition not as a passive inheritance but as an active practice—one that lives through us and, most importantly, through our students. Let us honor the past, embrace the present, and co-create a future where every student can find themselves in the story we tell together.

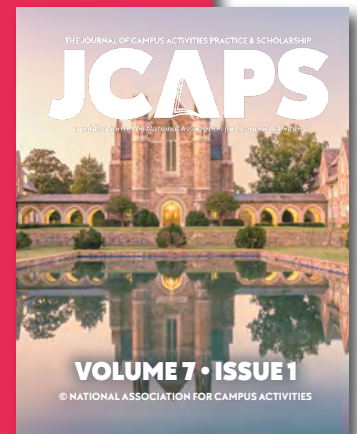
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FIND YOUR VOICE

Beyond the Board: Supporting Student Voices and Visions in Student Activities

by Mimi Peña

Introduction

College campuses and student life thrive on student programming, often led by students. However, not every event takes place in the spotlight of university programming boards. As schools aim to boost student involvement and a sense of belonging, they sometimes miss out on the energy and creativity of student-led efforts that happen independently. Consider all the peer-led workshops, cultural events, and civic engagement activities you come across each year. These activities are often driven by enthusiastic leaders from registered student organizations (RSOs) who truly want to connect and uplift the communities they're part of.

Research in higher education and student development consistently affirms that co-curricular activities are a key factor in student success. Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship (1999) emphasizes how students develop their internal voice and purpose through experiences that foster autonomy, reflection, and responsibility. This remains relevant because of the experiences students encounter during college that one may consider canon by now. Being involved in or leading a student organization provides students with opportunities to develop their voice and leadership skills. They are faced with making decisions, forming connections, and reflecting. Additionally, Museus' Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (2014) emphasizes that students are more likely to thrive in environments that validate their identities and allow them to

co-create their campus experience. Student-led programming provides the perfect opportunity for students to do just that, and undeniably serves as a space where meaningful engagement happens.

Student-led programming refers to events and initiatives organized by Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), either independently or sponsored. As campuses face increasing expectations for inclusivity and responsiveness, it is clear there is a growing need to support decentralized student-led events to complement existing engagement methods.

The call for decentralization is not a critique of the Campus Activities Boards (CABs) or University Programming Boards (UPBs) in our world, nor to take away from their undeniably outstanding efforts and contributions to student engagement and student life. However, it's an invitation to broaden how we support meaningful student activities. This paper explores why supporting independent efforts of student organizations is not only an equity issue but also a strategic move toward more holistic student development. Included are my personal observations and reflections from my current work with RSOs in the student involvement office at my institution. I do not claim, by any means, to be an expert, but these insights are intended to serve as conversation starters and points of consideration. Readers are invited to reimagine what it means to support student-led programming in its fullest form.

Importance of Non-Programming Board Student Events

While university programming boards play an important role in shaping student life, many meaningful events across campus originate beyond their board. Cultural, service, academic, or identity-based student organizations create relevant and community-focused programming that reflects the evolving needs of students. These non-programming board events should be celebrated and encouraged as they become essential in engaging students. To foster a thriving campus culture, institutions should recognize the importance of events led by students rather than treating them second-hand or considering them unofficial.

Flexibility and Cultural Relevance

Programming board events often require advance planning, various approvals, and institutional oversight. Student-led initiatives outside this system can be more adaptable. The ability to be flexible allows students to respond in real-time to emerging issues, global concerns, and community needs. Whether it's organizing a walkout after a national tragedy, hosting a pride celebration during a local controversy, or arranging an empowering panel of professionals to connect with, events such as these meet students where they are with relevance, immediacy, and authenticity. In leadership roles, students tend to draw on their lived experiences and general knowledge to inform their events. That authenticity is crucial for meaningful experiences, whereas certain elements may be overlooked or misinterpreted in institutional planning spaces. Co-curricular experiences should reflect student interests, their identities, and passions.

Diverse Voices and Broader Representation

Universities support so many different types of RSOs that represent various interests. You may find academic clubs hosting workshops and speakers, or sending students to conferences. Service organizations may host donation drives and volunteer fairs. Cultural organizations often plan for heritage celebrations, performances, and educational sessions centered on marginalized voices. Special interest clubs, e-sports, and the countless other types of organizations all contribute to the student experience, and their efforts should be equally supported. Different RSO classifications and official connections to the university may limit the support they receive, which ranges from zero support to full sponsorship. Perhaps there are still ways to expand support.

A decentralized model helps ensure that students from every type of RSO can have a hand in programming that reflects and affirms their identities. This includes supporting students from traditionally underrepresented groups involved in RSOs, supporting their efforts. As Museus (2014) emphasizes through the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model, validation and cultural familiarity are key factors in student success and belonging. Independent

student programming is where that cultural engagement can occur.

Responsiveness to Student Interests

Trends, memes, political events, news, and pop culture moments inspire events. It is unrealistic to rely solely on the student activities offices and programming boards to keep up with the demands of students on their own. This is where student-led programming is crucial. The immediacy and relevancy of planning events may drive higher attendance and more meaningful engagement. Strong word of mouth remains an effective way to get students to events across campus, so students need to have a legitimate interest to spread the word positively. Programming should be reflective of genuine student voices, rather than institutional assumptions about what students need or enjoy. A programming board might not be able to plan and get approval for a last-minute educational session on undocumented student support in the wake of rising fears and anxiety around ICE raids and mass deportations across the country. However, the Undocumented Immigrant Alliance can and will.

Autonomy and Leadership Development

One vital aspect of student involvement is the leadership opportunities they create. Students planning their own programs learn firsthand how to manage budgets, market events, negotiate, collaborate across groups or departments, and handle feedback or conflict. These are real-world leadership and project management skills that should be supported and developed in the same ways the leaders of the campus activities board are invested in. Students grow most when they are allowed to take ownership of their learning and decision-making (Magolda 1999). Independent programming requires students to define their goals, reflect on their values, and act with intentionality, which are foundational to becoming self-authored individuals. This deepens a student's college experience and prepares them to lead beyond campus.

Challenges Faced by Non-Programming Board Organizations

The enriched campus culture that supports non-programming board events is undeniable. However, these independent organizations and their leaders can often face challenges that hinder their capacity to execute meaningful programs and other initiatives. These challenges can lead to discouragement of student involvement and disparities in who is represented and whose voices are heard in campus life. Addressing these challenges is essential for creating a more inclusive campus culture.

Limited Access to Funding and Resources

A recurring challenge faced by non-programming board RSOs is inadequate access to funding. Programming boards

often receive substantial budgets, while independent student organizations must find alternative ways to fund their activities. The lack of funding support contributes to the disparities between the scale of events and the representation and visibility of students. Students find themselves fronting their personal funds, relying on fundraising, or additional sources of income, which is an added step to their planning process that programming boards do not encounter. Institutional support can also include access to professional staff, marketing and promotion support, and leadership development opportunities. Programming boards more typically have direct access to these items and more.

Competition for Space and Time

University programming boards and department events are more likely to reserve centralized event spaces further in advance, limiting access to prime locations for independent RSOs. When students are left with less desirable spaces and timeslots, attendance and visibility can be restricted, as well as the perceived importance of their events. For example, an event in recognition of a cultural heritage month or an RSO event being bumped to a classroom for another event that is considered high priority by the Event Services team can hinder a student's desire to plan events with their organization.

Lack of Advising Support

It is pretty common for programming boards to be advised by staff members of the university's student activities office. The majority of RSOs do not have that direct connection to staff with contextual knowledge of how to plan and facilitate successful programs. If RSOs are required to have a faculty/staff advisor on their roster, they are most commonly faculty and staff members across the university who volunteer their time to advise, which is likely beyond the scope of their everyday responsibilities. In many cases, this additional labor goes unpaid, making it difficult for student involvement offices to establish minimum levels of involvement for advisors. This inevitably leads to disparities in the type of support students receive. Additionally, with sometimes limited availability, advisors are not equally trained or knowledgeable on how to navigate university logistics or how to work through learning opportunities that arise when leading a registered student organization.

Many students from traditionally underrepresented identities find community in the RSOs they join. There are already existing challenges they may experience while navigating campus, and student involvement should not be yet another system for them to navigate.

Strategies to Support Non-Programming Board Organizations

Non-programming board RSOs are often navigating systems that are not designed with them in mind, a familiar

experience for many college students in general. It is a big undertaking for universities to reimagine these longstanding systems that have traditionally catered to some groups but not all. Perhaps we should start on a smaller scale to reconsider how we can support students in navigating these existing systems. Institutions can empower students to lead and build authentic campus communities by investing in equity-minded support systems that cater to the varying needs of student organizations. This section includes ideas and items that have worked well in my current role supporting RSOs at a small private institution.

Inclusive Funding Opportunities

Equitable access to funding is essential for leveling the playing field in student-led programming. Although student affairs professionals may not be able to update purchasing guidelines for the institution directly, they can, however, update or create a funding request and allocation process to include student organizations of all types and sizes, as well as the opportunities they hope to build. This can include simplifying the application process, dedicating funding pools to allocate, and adjusting requirements that often unintentionally favor traditional events or more established groups.

I've seen firsthand the success of making this type of update in my current role. Our Student Involvement office recently updated our funding request process to reach more broadly the registered student organizations that are unsponsored and do not receive annual university funds to operate. The pool of funds for this process depleted mid-spring semester, and we saw a huge increase in RSO activity. All organizations continued to adhere to the same university purchasing guidelines, but removing the funding barriers was one factor that contributed to the increase in programming.

Training for Registered Student Organizations

Many times, students step into leadership roles without prior experience in managing student organizations or planning events. Student involvement professionals can support them by offering training workshops that specifically focus on event planning, budgeting, risk management, etc. There is no singular successful way or modality to train leaders of registered student organizations. During my time as a student involvement professional, I have found that many of us, across all institution types, are constantly thinking of creative ways to convey information to students and ensure their comprehension of the essentials to operate as a group. Similar to purchasing guidelines, changes to institutional event policies are beyond the control of staff in roles that support student-led programming. However, what can be offered are clear guides that are student-friendly to understand, possibly in multiple formats and modalities.

My office is currently working to transition our policy-driven RSO Handbook into an RSO Guidebook. The goal is to reduce

institutional jargon and prioritize content that students can easily reference and understand the actionable steps required to see through the plans of their organization. We also created a SharePoint site (our institution's internal Microsoft platform) for our office. This is our centralized spot for RSOs to have access to resources and for anyone interested in student involvement. Trainings are posted to the site, registration information, and numerous links to additional resources that may support their organization.

Advising, Mentorship, and Peer-Level Support

There is a natural connection between the student activities professional staff members and the university programming boards due to their shared goals and scale of programming. However, all RSOs can benefit from having access to individuals with this type of institutional knowledge. I fully acknowledge how nearly impossible it is for student activities staff members to have a hand in advising all registered student organizations on their campus, especially considering the institutions that support 1,000+ RSOs. However, we can still consider the information groups have access to and create intentional training opportunities or resources for advisors.

For my campus, we host monthly RSO events called Leadership Councils, where RSO leaders are invited to connect with each other and our office over some dinner (free food!). We rely on this monthly moment to share information and hear directly from RSOs about their plans and needs. Additionally, we are fortunate to employ student workers whom we train on basic RSO essentials and operations. This way, at any given time of the year, a current or emerging group can visit our office for peer-level support, ask questions, and be referred to relevant online information.

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but a starting point or simply items to consider. The work on my campus is not perfect, but we were able to implement these solutions and see success. Expanding access and support for non-programming board organizations affirms leadership development and a campus community more representative of the full spectrum of student interests.

Conclusion

We must constantly ask ourselves, "Are we supporting all student voices, or disproportionately the ones most visible?" This paper has explored the powerful role that student-led programming, especially from outside a centralized university programming board, plays in enriching campus culture, fostering identity development, and cultivating leadership. Student-led events and the variety of RSOs on a college campus are reflective of the student body and are central to a student's sense of belonging, community, and purpose. Supporting these efforts is not just good practice, but it is a matter of equity and inclusion.

In response to the challenges outlined, including funding, planning, and advising barriers, this paper presents a few solutions to reconsider or reimagine access to support. By embracing new strategies, campuses can move forward in meeting student needs and supporting the events they want to lead. Imagine what student life could look like if all registered student organizations were equally empowered to lead, organize, and create. As student affairs professionals, leaders, and partners, we are well-positioned to make this vision a reality. Let's broaden access and support for all student-led programming beyond the programming board, and recognize the brilliance and resilience that already exists in student-driven initiatives across our campuses. The future of student engagement is decentralized, diverse, and student-led. It is here and waiting to be supported.

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The State of Student Engagement on Campus

by
Swank Motion Pictures

How Student Engagement is Changing—and What Schools Can Do About It

Today's college students are redefining campus engagement. Rising social anxiety and a preference for low-stakes, pressure-free activities mean traditional events might no longer draw the crowds they once did.

At the same time, Gen Z's love of nostalgia and appetite for gamified, interactive experiences are reshaping what successful campus programming looks like. This generation is also deeply values-driven: they care about social causes and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) – with roughly [80 percent of college-bound Gen Z](#) considering campus diversity an important factor in their college choice. However, new legislative restrictions on DEI initiatives in some states are making inclusive programming more complicated.

Here's a look at the key trends impacting Gen Z engagement—and how campus programmers can respond with events that are inclusive, relevant and built for today's students.

The Changing Landscape of Student Engagement

Student engagement on campus isn't what it used to be – and that's not a bad thing. As Gen Z becomes the majority of college students, their unique perspectives, anxieties and interests are transforming how they engage with campus life.

Rising Social Anxiety & Low-Stakes Preferences

Today's students are experiencing higher levels of anxiety and stress than any generation before them. A growing number report feeling nervous in social settings, with more than [60 percent identifying as socially anxious](#) and [79 percent reporting feelings of loneliness](#).

Many missed key social milestones due to the pandemic, which has made large, in-person events feel even more intimidating. After years of interacting behind screens, many are out of practice with face-to-face socializing and fear saying or doing the wrong thing. One study noted that [Gen Z feels profoundly disconnected socially](#), even as they crave community – a paradox likely intensified by heavy social media use. Which is why low-key events – [like going to the movies – is on the rise](#).

Gen Z wants to connect, but in ways that feel casual and safe. For these students, a high-energy mixer or live open mic might feel overwhelming – not inviting. That's why low-pressure events are seeing better turnout. Think movie nights, watch parties, drop-in craft sessions or chill lounge pop-ups – events where participation can be as passive or active as students choose.

Gen Z doesn't want to isolate; they do want to meet people and have fun, but ideally in formats where they [retain a sense of control and comfort](#). Colleges need to adjust by offering events that allow students to engage at their own pace.

Love of Nostalgia & Interactive Fun

Gen Z might be young, but they have a surprisingly nostalgic streak. They're often drawn to the music, movies and pop culture of the '80s, '90s and early 2000s – eras before most of them were born.

In a study by GWI, [70 percent of Gen Z said they enjoy](#) listening to or watching media from earlier decades because it reminds them of a simpler time. For students, retro-themed events (like a '90s throwback movie night or a vintage video game tournament) aren't corny – they're comforting and novel. Nostalgia offers a form of escape and common ground, giving students an easy conversation starter.

Gamification can boost engagement by nearly 50%

Combining nostalgia with gamification can be especially effective. A trivia night centered around a beloved movie, or a film screening that includes a bingo card of iconic scenes, invites participation without pressure. These events help students break the ice and find common ground – without needing to stand out.

experiences. According to marketing research, incorporating game-like features can significantly boost engagement; one analysis found gamified experiences can [increase user engagement by up to 47 percent](#). The campus implication: add a trivia quiz, competition or reward element to an event, and you're likely to see more enthusiastic participation.

Values-Driven Engagement: DEI and Social Causes

Gen Z cares deeply about inclusion, equity and social justice. Their engagement isn't just about entertainment – it's about purpose.

How to Adapt Your Student Engagement Strategy for Gen Z

- Offer low-pressure, casual events. Choose formats like movie nights, craft bars or open lounge hours where participation is relaxed.
- Incorporate nostalgia. Tap into Gen Z's love for the past with throwback themes, retro movie nights or trivia.
- Add gamified elements. Boost participation by incorporating an interactive element to your programming like digital trivia, bingo or scavenger hunts.
- Align with student values. Create opportunities that support inclusion, social impact and activism.
- Promote diverse representation. Ensure your events reflect the variety of identities and cultures on campus through content, speakers and visuals.
- Navigate DEI laws with creativity. Focus on inclusive themes like global cultures, wellness or community without violating new regulations.
- Empower students. Let student leaders co-create events and weigh in on programming to ensure authenticity and relevance.

Equally important is Gen Z's appetite for gamification. This is a generation raised on interactive experiences. They respond to elements of play and challenge woven into

Diversity is the top quality high school seniors want in a campus community

Programming that supports these values can lead to high turnout and meaningful impact. Even general entertainment events can be tied to social values through post-film discussions, donation tie-ins or themes that celebrate different identities.

That said, Gen Z also has a strong radar for inauthenticity. If an event feels performative or disconnected from student realities, it may get ignored. Inclusion needs to be baked

[A 2024 United Way NCA survey](#) found nearly 40 percent of Gen Z college students are regularly engaged in activism or social justice efforts (compared to 24 percent of Millennials). They're attending protests, running awareness campaigns and organizing volunteer efforts. They expect their campuses to reflect and support the same values. In one poll of high school seniors (Class of 2024), diversity was the top factor they looked for in terms of campus community – with more than [75 percent of students claiming](#) a diverse student population was either a “must have” or “appealing” and the majority of students wanting a campus where students are active on social issues and intercultural services. Such findings confirm that inclusive campus culture is non-negotiable for Gen Z.

into the structure of engagement through diverse speakers, accessible marketing, and programming that celebrates many voices.

Essentially, demonstrating that the college supports inclusion – not just in words but in everyday student life – helps build trust and enthusiasm among Gen Z students.

Navigating DEI Legislation Challenges

As DEI expectations rise, some colleges face new limitations. [More than 30 bills across the U.S. have been proposed](#) to limit or ban DEI efforts on campuses, and at least 15 had been signed into law across states like Florida, Texas, Tennessee and Iowa. These laws range from prohibiting mandatory diversity training, to defunding campus diversity offices, to banning programming that espouses certain concepts about race or gender.

This presents a real challenge: students still want inclusive programming, but staff must ensure compliance with evolving state laws.

In response, some schools are reframing events more broadly – offering programs under the banners of “leadership,” “wellness,” or “heritage” rather than explicitly labeling them as DEI. Others are increasing support for student-led initiatives that allow cultural, identity-based and social justice programming to continue through independent student groups.

Ultimately, colleges must walk a careful line – finding creative ways to uphold inclusive values while staying compliant with local regulations. Removing DEI entirely from campus life isn’t an option – Gen Z expects more.

Conclusion

Engaging Gen Z requires more than planning events—it means understanding what matters to them. They’re anxious, thoughtful, nostalgic and values-driven. They want community, but on their own terms. By offering flexible, inclusive and meaningful programming, colleges can help students feel connected, supported and excited to participate in campus life.



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The 2022-2025 [Strategic Plan](#) for the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) states that the Association will “Build and champion the case for Campus Activities as critical to creating campus communities where everyone belongs.” Using the existing literature in the field, the white paper discusses the foundations and functions of Campus Activities; the influence of Campus Activities on sense of belonging; and the relationship between Campus Activities and student retention and persistence.

Foundations of Campus Activities

Campus Activities are beyond-the-classroom experiences that intentionally connect, engage, and develop a college community where everyone belongs. Campus Activities play a vital role in supporting students' development by providing opportunities for engagement and by allowing students to explore their interests, values, and leadership potential in a supportive environment. Campus Activities foster a sense of community and belonging.

Sense of Belonging & Campus Activities

Sense of belonging is the extent to which individuals feel accepted, respected, included, and safe in their university environment. Factors that influence belonging include:

- Environment - includes programs, policies, physical spaces, etc. which students engage with and interpret to determine if they feel they belong. Campus Activities contribute to an environment where students have opportunities to meet peers with shared identities and interests and engage in activities that help them learn, develop, and grow, contributing to their sense of belonging.
- Involvement - students who are involved on campus are more satisfied with their college experience and feel greater belonging. Involvement ranges from attending an event to leading a student organization.
- Relationships - help students develop interpersonal skills, coping skills, and social connections. Campus Activities play a crucial role in fostering social integration and relationships with peers and educators by providing opportunities for social interaction and connection.

It is important to note that student identity interacts with these factors, and each student experiences belonging differently.

Retention & Persistence

Sense of belonging is a significant factor in student retention. Campus Activities influence retention and persistence via student sense of belonging. Campus Activities professionals must be equipped to tell this story and the stories of their own campuses in order to make the case for Campus Activities.

**Check out the Case for
Campus Activities Here**