



## A Guide to Planning Programs

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## **What is a Program?**

A program can be defined as a coordinated activity planned for multiple people. Programs can encompass a wide variety of approaches ranging from a passive educational bulletin board, a fundraiser for charity, an educational program, a dance, haunted house, or anything in between. Programs can be intended for an intimate audience or thousands of people. There are many types of programs that an organization can provide, including; educational, social, civic, athletic, or any other type of experience. The event can last all day or for an hour. Ultimately a program sponsored by your organization can be organized, coordinated, and executed however you see fit.

## **What is the Purpose of Programming?**

When planning a program be sure to do so intentionally. Whether the purpose of a program is strictly to provide a fun experience for students or to challenge how they think, ask yourself, why you are programming. Consider the needs of your campus. Are there specific needs of the campus and the student body? Are you working to improve conditions on campus through an innovative and thought provoking event? Is the point of your event to raise awareness of an important cause or concern or just to have a night of fun? Take a risk. Do not be afraid that an event is too large or too different. Try new programs - you won't know what will be successful until you try.

## **What Does it Mean to Plan a Program?**

Planning a program is a process. This includes budgeting, establishing primary dates, alternative rain dates, selecting and reserving the event site, acquiring permits, and coordinating transportation and parking.

When you decide on an event you need to plan and map out how the event will operate. Does the event have a theme? Can your theme be seen through the decorations and advertising? How are the tables and chairs, if any, arranged? Do you have music at the event? Do you have enough volunteers to work the event? There are many questions to be considered when planning a successful event.

### **What do I get out of it?**

Programming for the purpose of enhancing the Oklahoma State University community can also augment your time at OSU. It provides a great outlet for being creative and having fun. The skills that you will be utilizing in programming are transferable to any number of jobs that you may apply for in the future. This transferable skill set will not only prove to be beneficial to you but your organization as well. There are countless benefits you can gain through this experience.

### **Programming...how do I do it?**

Programming and event planning is not a specific science. There are no explicit formulas, graphs, or charts in order to help you plan. As a programmer it is your job to create a program that is fun, enjoyable, and successful. In the process of planning and implementing a program there are a wide range of factors to be considered. While there is no one way to create a program, there are a number of tips and skills that can be acquired to help you in the successful implementation of your event that will be covered later.

If you are currently questioning yourself, don't. Planning a good program takes time, hard work, and dedication. There are countless programs that you can implement and plan. While programming is not always easy, it can be a great and very rewarding opportunity. You have the chance to develop a lifelong skill set that can be applied to many areas throughout your life. This guide will help steer you on the path to success

### **How to Start a Program**

Before starting a program, consider who your target audience will be. Is your event geared toward a specific population at OSU, toward the general student body, or a combination of OSU and members of the Stillwater community? Knowing your target audience is essential for developing a successful program.

Once you have determined who your event is for, create a list of needs for the program. Consider specifics because if you need to put in requests or reserve a specific location you must allow enough time to do it. If you are having a hard time generating a list, ask yourself a few important questions. Do you need help from reserving rooms through Meeting and Conference Services? Are you working with

Catering on dining options? If you have a performer or speaker, do you need a stage setup? These types of questions can help you determine what you need in order to make your event come to life. Also, do not be afraid to review your needs with your organization or advisor to help you refine your list.

Once you have established your specific needs, create a timeline that you can access and share with your organization and Advisor. Be sure to draft a timeline that incorporates multiple dimensions. Your timeline should include marketing, purchasing, promotions, specific needs, etc. Having a working timeline can help you see potential problems and address them before they become an issue. Proper time management will help to ensure that you have a successful program.

Now that you have your needs and timeline, figure out how you are going to make it work. Creating a checklist is a simple way to ensure that you stay on task and manage all of your requirements. Be sure that you have contacted any departments around campus that you are working with to confirm your needs. Some departments that you might work with include: Student Union Marketing, Meeting and Conference Services, Catering, etc. Think about what roles your members will play and how much help you will need with specific tasks or objectives. Your timeline and checklist will help you minimize stress and create a successful program.

### **Planning a High Quality Program**

One thing you can do to enhance the reputation of your organization is to hold high quality events. Creating the proper atmosphere at your program can alter the experiences of those in attendance and be a determining factor in whether they return for future programs. While conceptualizing the mood or atmosphere as a whole might be difficult, there are many factors that play into creating the right environment. Try considering them individually.

Make sure that your event is well rehearsed and planned out. Have a plan in order to alleviate unnecessary stress. If you are hosting a talent show or performance, hold a dress rehearsal before the real performance. Consider staging and the layout of your space. Keep in mind any special needs of your audience (wheelchair access, signing for hearing impaired students, etc.) Whether you are in the Student Union Ballroom or the Kerr-Drummond Mezzanine make sure you have an idea of how you

want the stage laid out, where your performers, decorations, tables and chairs should be. The proper setup can help to create a natural flow and make the event run smoothly.

Aside from setup, having the appropriate decorations for a program can help to enhance the experience significantly. Decorating for some programs might come easily. For instance, a luau/Hawaiian themed social might incorporate giving out leis, beach or exotic decorations (palm trees, beach decorations, surf boards, hula dancers, etc.) Other events might be more of a challenge, (coffee houses, karaoke nights, etc.)

Make sure you have a plan for your organization's members who are at the program. Decide if you need people greeting attendees at the door or if you need members stationed at tables inside. This will not only help make the event run more smoothly, but will help to create an enjoyable experience.

When planning, it is easy to get caught up with specific details but try to gain perspective on the event as a whole. Share your plan with your organization and advisor to gain input and be receptive to their feedback. If you were coming to this program what would you want to see, what would you think? Be willing to take risks and have fun with the experience!

### **Plan Ahead and Think Outside the Box**

It is important to make sure that your organization has ample time to think about ideas. Creating a timeline for your program is essential in planning a successful program. Planning your program early allows you to think creatively, foresee issues and resolve them before they ever take place. On page [9](#) you will find a programming timeline that is useful for most small scale programs. However for large programs you should plan at least six months if not one year out from the date (homecoming, concerts, performances, etc.). Additionally, planning in advance allows your organization's members the chance to become more engaged in not only the program but the organization as a whole.

As a leader you have the chance to make positive changes. If you think that a program is no longer successful or if you think something else might work better, great! Do not be afraid to try something new because you never know how successful it will be until you have tried.

Keep brainstorming ideas throughout the semester. Inspiration can come to a person at any point in time so be sure you make the most of it when it comes around. Proposing fun and exciting programs is critical for the success of your organization.

### **How to Manage a Challenging Program**

More than likely your program will be a great success as a result of your hard work, dedication, team work, and great planning. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes there will be challenges that arise unexpectedly even if you planned to the best of your ability. Learn how to deal with a program that might not turn out as you expected, address the problem and keep moving.

In a bad situation, always remain calm. If something does not go as planned, try not to let other people see that you are upset. Remember that the people in attendance at your program will more than likely not know what is or is not supposed to happen, so do your best to keep a level head. If you need to, step away for a few seconds to pull it together. It is very difficult to deal with stress if you are not calm and collected. Let's work through some potential problems...

For example, if you are in the Student Union and are missing tables for a program or the sound system is not working, these are easy problems to resolve. Contact Meeting and Conference Services to locate a night manager or tech who can help you. If you ever experience continuous problems with a specific department please notify the Office of Campus Life and we will help you resolve the problem. Whatever the dilemma is, remember to stay calm and work with your organization's members and advisor to help resolve the problems.

### **Evaluating Your Program**

So you had great attendance at your program, you cleaned up and are ready to go...but you are not done yet. One of the most important steps is still left, evaluating your program. Once you have completed a program take time to reflect on the event as a whole. While it is not expected for you to complete an evaluation the minute you are done you should look at the event through a critical lens.

Take time to consider how the program went. How did those in attendance respond? What worked out well? How effective was your marketing? Were there any

problems outside of your control? By asking yourself questions you are better able to understand not only the event but also your own skills. Evaluating your work will help future leaders know whether the event was successful and if it should be continued or altered.

### **Evaluating Your Program's Costs**

It is important to evaluate the costs involved with the program. A cost benefit analysis is a great tool to use to evaluate the cost of the event compared to the number of participants/attendees. This lets you see the price per person and can you help determine if the event is financially worth redoing at a later date. Additionally consider the opportunity cost of the program; this means the amount of time that the members put in to preparing and running their event.

If the program was low in cost but required a large amount of time and had low attendance and satisfaction, then it is important to consider if the program is worth repeating. Also do not overlook the inherent value a program provides for those in attendance. Speakers, trainings, and other positive programs can provide a great experience for those in attendance even if the cost may be high. When conducting your evaluations be sure to gain input from your advisor and organization members so that there are multiple perspectives on the program being represented.

### **Evaluating Your Role in the Program**

As a student leader your interactions with your organization, its members, and the advisor will provide you with a wide range of experiences. Taking time to reflect on your experiences is beneficial and can help you to develop your skills and grow. Listed below are sample questions that can help you reflect on your progress.

- Did I plan far enough in advance?
- Was I able to delegate responsibility well?
- Did I involve others in the planning process?
- Was I able to address issues ahead of time?
- Did this program represent my organization(s) well?
- Was I able to enjoy the program?



- It is important to not only evaluate the program as a whole, but how you went about the planning process. This will help you resolve and avoid issues in future programs.

### **Programming Timeline**

This timeline should be used for small scale programming. For larger programs you should plan at least six months if not one year out from the date (homecoming, concerts, performances, etc.).

#### **8 Weeks Out**

- Discuss ideas
  - What are the needs of your organization?
  - Is there a current issue on campus that your organization can address?
- What is the purpose of the program?
  - Fundraiser
  - Raise awareness of a cause
  - Educational
  - Fun
  - Member recognition
  - Community Service
- Be sure to gain input from members of your organization!

#### **6 Weeks Out**

- Finalize program
  - Pick a time and date
  - Find and reserve a location
    - Be sure to plan a rain date in case of weather
  - Determine the title/slogan of your program
- Create a budget
  - Setup costs
  - Advertising
  - Merchandise
  - Food

- Decorations
- Other
- Delegate responsibilities
  - Make sub-committees if needed

#### 4 Weeks Out

- If you have not already complete any permits/forms needed for your event (library lawn, physical plant, etc.)
- Check in with members/committees who you delegated tasks
  - Do they need help
  - Have they been able to meet their goals?
    - If not how can you help?
- Plan advertising campaign
  - Chalking
  - Fliers
  - Social Media
  - Posters

#### 2 Weeks Out

- Launch advertising campaign
- Confirm floor plan/setup for program
- Purchase any merchandise necessary
- Assign members for setup, running, and cleaning up program

#### Week of Program

- Hold meeting with all members involved to go over logistics of program
- Continue with advertising campaign
- Finalize purchases
- Confirm schedule for those setting up, working, and cleaning up the program

#### Day of Program

- Oversee setup
- Make any last minute changes to program schedule necessary
- Coordinate volunteers
- Keep track of the number of attendees present

- Execute cleanup
- Enjoy the experience

#### Post program

- Evaluate your program
  - Attendance
  - Cost
  - Preparedness
  - Execution
  - Members
  - Yourself