

## **10 Tips to Planning a Successful Day Conference**

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In the world of residential life the opportunities for professional development seem to be around every corner. Topics such as: coaching, listening, mediation, program planning, relationship development, and motivational interviewing are frequently made available to professionals throughout the academic year. For our para-professionals and student staff however, this is not always the case. In order to keep our student staff performing at the highest level possible in their positions they too must continue to learn, train and develop as individuals.

One of the most effective ways to provide student staff with this development is through a day long “drive-in” conference. These conferences can take various forms from a day long drive-in for the state or region, to a campus closed conference inviting only on campus students to attend. Topics can be anything. They can range from leadership to community service to individual development or to relationship building. Whichever options you choose, the conference will hopefully be a positive experience for the attendees and will increase their skill set through their participation.

In my experience, a successful conference must have some guidance. After serving on the planning committee for an on-campus leadership conference for two years and assisting in the hosting of a regional professional conference on-campus, I have developed some tips. Below are my 10 tips you must remember that will help guide you in your planning and execution of a successful conference.

### **1. Plan Ahead**

This sounds simplistic and elementary, but there is nothing more important than this simple point. It is easy not to follow this as there are so many day to day tasks that one can get caught up in, and planning for a conference gets put to the wayside. A time cushion is one of the most vital things when planning a successful conference. A time cushion through carefully planning ensures that every step is being taken, it keeps tasks from falling through the cracks (and if they do you have time to complete them) and it gives you the best opportunity for a high attendance. One tool that can prove to be very useful when planning ahead is the computer program Microsoft Project. If you are familiar at all with this program it can help you greatly in organizing your timeline of what tasks need to get done by when, which tasks must get done before others can be started, etc. Planning ahead can be greatly helpful and is vital to a successful conference.

### **2. Be Prompt**

Not only is it good manners, but being on time can save you a great deal of time in planning for your conference. If you are late to planning meetings, or start your meetings late because of a few late members, you are losing time of when your group can be effective working on the planning together. Additionally, it is not good role modeling. Tardiness to meetings can be cleared up quickly through having an intentional

conversation with the members of your conference planning group as well as starting on time regardless if some members haven't arrived yet. Being prompt not only saves you time, but it also improves the reputation that you present to others that help you in putting on the conference; campus partners, conference attendees, housing colleagues, etc.

3. **Be Polite**

Politeness seems to be harder and harder to find today in the world. Today it is rare to find individuals that do something as simple as saying "Please" and "Thank You" when relating with others. It is amazing how far these simple words will get you with others when you use them. A conference can not be put on with just a few individuals hard work. In order for it to take place you must work with volunteers, presenters, campus departments, just to name a few. Continually thanking and recognizing the efforts your planning committee members are making throughout the process is especially important. This will not only help them feel appreciated but will also keep them motivated and energized as the planning process continues through to execution. By consciously being polite with all of the individuals who make a conference possible you will increase the chance for success for the conference, increase the likelihood of partnership in the future, and strengthen the professional image and relationship you have with that other party.

4. **Delegation, Delegation, Delegation**

Delegation not only allows tasks that must get done for a conference to get done on time, but it also decreases the stress load that you as the conference chair will naturally take on. However, delegation must be done with tact. Continuous relaying of tasks without attention to the needs and time commitments of the individuals on your planning committee can be detrimental and potentially decrease the support you can receive from them. True delegation is performed when you pay attention to your planning committee members needs, trust their ability to complete the tasks and know that some members of your committee can be more efficient at completing some tasks than others. Simply put, know the needs and resources of your group. Also remember when delegating tasks to give expectations and set deadlines so that your planning committee members have a clear idea of what needs to be done and by when.

5. **Listen**

Listening is a skill that must be learned and can not be acquired through reading a book. Be intentional to listen to everyone. It is amazing where some of the best suggestions come from. You can't be too prideful to accept them no matter who they come from. Just because the person is on the committee and working for you or because you and the other person don't get along is not a good enough reason to not accept a great suggestion. Listen to those around you, especially those that are helping you, and pay attention to what they have to say. It may just make the difference that turns your conference from distress to success.

6. **Log the hours**

Working in any area of residential life is going to require long hours and many times these will occur during odd times of the day and night. Working on a conference is

no exception. Be prepared to spend many hours not only in preparation but in the stages of set-up and take-down that always seem to take longer than they should. As mentioned earlier in the Plan Ahead section, it can be hard to balance coordinating a conference with your regular job requirements that you may have. One way to help mitigate this is to set aside time each week on your work calendar (an hour or two block of time) to work just on conference planning so that you don't fall behind. Hard work and dedication through many hours of work will help to make your conference a success.

7. **Get your hands dirty**

Too often people “lead” or “advise” by delegating (as was mentioned earlier) and don't get very involved with the work that's being done. As a conference chair you must be able to get your hands dirty, get right in there with your planning group and help with some of the tasks that are being performed. Obviously you won't be able to help with everything, and as the chair you shouldn't so that you don't lose sight of your own tasks, but showing your planning committee that you can get right in there with them earns you not only respect but a willingness to follow. This will prove invaluable as the conference gets closer and the late hours grow longer in preparation for it.

8. **Execute with Enthusiasm**

Hopefully after lots of planning the conference is ready to start and the final stage has come – execution. This is the time to shine, the last step, you cannot falter. It is easy in this stage to let your exhaustion from many weeks of planning and late nights show on your face but you need to keep this from happening. Carrying out the conference with a smile on your face and with lots of positive and enthusiastic energy will transport the experience from ordinary to extraordinary. Even if things are going wrong as the conference unfolds, keep the smile on your face and the energy up, your attendees usually won't be any the wiser. If nothing else, remember that you have spent countless hours putting this experience together and now that it's finally here, you might as well enjoy doing it!

9. **Executive Decisions**

As a conference chair there will be decisions that come up that will need to be made on the spot and you must be comfortable with this. These decisions can range from technology issues (projectors not working), to a speaker not showing, to food arriving late. Making these types of last minute decisions usually incorporates in it an element of flexibility that you need to have. Be flexible and be quick, any minutes lost wavering on a decision could have a tremendous effect. If you have done everything else right, your conference team will have faith that your executive decisions will be the right ones.

10. **Follow Up**

When a conference is over there is hopefully much celebration among you and your planning committee. Even though the attendees are long gone and everything is packed up, there is some closure that still needs to take place. There needs to be closure through reflection and through thanks. Reflection must take place within your planning committee to discover what went well, what didn't go well, and what could be changed to make it better in the future. Thanks must be given to those on your committee as well as

to all of those that helped make the conference possible; presenters, campus partners, volunteers, etc. Simple thank you cards are becoming rarities these days which makes them all the more important. Thanking individuals through this medium can go a long way and will again increase your professional reputation while making individuals that made the conference possible feel appreciated.

Planning and executing a conference can be a very challenging and rewarding experience. Hopefully these 10 tips will decrease the challenge and increase the reward you receive when working on your conference. Remember that you are providing something for your students that is not offered enough and they will become better students, leaders, and contributors to society because of it.