



Ten Ways to Keep Students in Your Club Active

by Dr. Charles Taylor

This article is intended to help student leaders dramatically improve how they engage and involve their members in their organizations.

While working with student groups across the country, I've picked up some successful strategies to help you keep students active in your organization. Below I've briefly described ten of the best. If you implement these strategies consistently, you should experience increased involvement in your campus organization.

1. Distribute Your Minutes

Distribute your minutes to those who are present, but especially to those who are absent. Send minutes to your advisor, your funding source, professors or administrators who support you or from whom you are seeking support. This one little practice of distributing your minutes will have tremendous payoff at the end of the year. The minutes that you distribute to students should include a record of who was present and who was absent. When students get a copy of the minutes with their names listed under absent, they'll know they were not only missed but expected to be there.

Gutmann (2010) discusses in her book, the importance of meeting minutes. Taking good minutes are vital to the success of any meeting. They help those participants who lost concentration at some point to make up for anything they might have missed. The action points are an important reminder and a means to reflect by members who might have agreed on something in the heat of moment.

Minutes are also the 'historical record' of the meeting, and especially important for people who did not attend the meeting. Therefore from an informational point of view, minutes are really important. Wolfe (2006), in a study of meeting minutes argues that minutes can be used as an effective management tool, by making consensus concrete and holding individuals accountable for action. The way that minutes are written down can propel the team or organization forward.

2. Involve All of Your Members

Involve all of your members in the organization so they feel a part of it. If there is a perception that a few people make all the decisions then it becomes more difficult to sustain student interest in the organization. Find out what your members' strengths are and where they would like to contribute. Offer positive reinforcement and encouragement to your members when they complete a task regardless of how big or small it is.



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According to organizational support theory when employees perceive that the organization values their efforts and cares about their well being, they respond by showing greater commitment towards the organization (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Put differently a lack of concern on part of your campus organization could result in a loss of membership and participation. It is therefore doubly important for your organization to make your members feel connected and provide them opportunities to take part in all activities so that they feel like their presence is needed and appreciated.

Sergent and Sedlacek (1990), discuss the person-environment fit to explain volunteer behavior among students. According to this theory people tend to seek out environments that fit their personality types and where they can express their strengths and skills in a less restricted fashion. Based on this information, you should try to match people to responsibilities and make the planning process as comfortable for people as you can, so that they too can get the most out of their membership and would continue to feel motivated to be part of the organization.

3. Evaluate Your Organization

Evaluate your organization and survey your membership. Is the time and date you're meeting the best time for most members? Are your meetings too long; too short? Is the agenda well organized? Are members' talents and abilities being well utilized? Feedback from a survey can help you determine that. Find out the top two reasons why members miss meetings and don't participate. Do they know in advance what's going to be on the agenda? Who determines how the funds are spent? Who determines which programs are offered? Can any member bring an agenda item to the meeting? Does your organization really reflect the wishes of its members or the wishes of its leadership? When you evaluate every aspect of your organization you have to ask these tough questions.

Cameron (1980) suggests that in evaluating any organization's performance, care must be taken in specifying and delineating organizational effectiveness. By that he meant that different organizations might be effective on one criteria of evaluation but ineffective from another perspective. While evaluating your organization's performance over the course of time, care should be taken in creating the yardstick against which you would be comparing it. If you set your 'goals' too high, you might be setting yourself up for an impossible task to accomplish, and by aiming too low, you might not be using the organization's potential to the fullest.

4. Assign Responsibilities by Month

To sustain year long involvement and to get various students to work together, designate each month or every other month to certain members. For example, freshman and junior members can plan activities for April, while sophomores and seniors handle May; or females



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plan October's activities while males plan November's, etc. This allows you to involve everyone and spread the responsibility for getting things accomplished to a wide range of members. When students assume responsibility, they also assume ownership of that particular assignment.

5. Use Technology Effectively

Try to have major events advertised on the university website in a conspicuous place if possible. Contact people through text, email, skype, and/or Facebook. Start a Google group so that information may be shared more effectively. Create a Facebook event for important meetings and send out reminders and RSVPs. Follow-up after the meeting using whichever portal you find best.

Baird and Fisher (2005), discuss the importance of social media in the life of the modern student, and how it can be used to make the learning process more interesting for today's student. The same approach can be used by student organizations to capture student interest. Students use technology to keep informed, so there should be a website dedicated to the organization, that is frequently updated, and where students can interact and find out about new events.

6. Have Each One Bring One

Challenge each member to bring someone from the absent list to the next meeting or invite a potential member. Then provide some type of acknowledgement each month by recognizing the person who has brought the most members each month.

Normally, organizations contact members before the meeting starts, asking them whether they plan on attending or not. Well, try a little reverse psychology. After each meeting, contact those who were absent. Inform the absentees that they missed an important meeting and that their presence is needed at the next meeting so that your organization's work can continue.

7. Develop Incentives

A system of rewards can work to get people to join and be active members in your group. The most effective incentives are those that invest in your members' personal or professional goals. For example, if you discover that most of your members are interested in improving their tech skills, then offer incentives that encourage that. Sponsor workshops or encourage tutoring opportunities. If there is a clear benefit that relates to the members' long or short-term goals, then they are more likely to be invested in the organization. In addition to professional incentives, there must be social incentives too. Sponsor activities for



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the group to participate in either before or after the meeting so people look forward to attending. Reduce dues by 10% for good attendance or for students who make the Dean's list.

8. Provide Confidential Information

At each meeting try to have important announcements, or news that they can only get by attending the meetings. You can mention this information in your minutes under confidential message but don't describe it. This sends the message that your meetings are very important and when they miss, they are missing out on valuable information.

9. Create a Clear Mission Statement

Create a clear mission statement that accurately reflects the organization and make sure that all members believe in and support it. Try to construct a collective vision and allow everyone to take part in its creation. Revisit your mission statement at least annually. This is one way of making sure that everyone is on the same page and interested in the same overarching goals. A strong and meaningful mission statement gives members a sense of purpose.

Weiss and Piderit (1999), looked at the mission statement of 304 public schools and compared their performance before and after adopting the mission statement in order to evaluate whether mission statements have any effect or not. While they did not come up with any blanket results for mission statements, they did find that the tone of mission statements has a relationship with the school performance.

In general, mission statements that had a strong activist tone and expressed the desire on part of the leadership to act upon the mission statement, there was a greater likelihood of better performance. The mission statement for any organization therefore, should not just be clear, but indicate the desire on part of the leadership to take action to fulfill the organization's mission.

10. Experiment, Experiment, Experiment!

Don't give up! Don't expect change overnight. Try new approaches and new ways to involve members, such as the following:

a. For freshman students, try sending their parents a letter introducing your organization and asking parents to encourage their child to get involved with it.



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- b. Have your public affairs office send out press releases about students in your organization to their hometown newspapers.
- c. Try to get your organization featured regularly in your campus' newspaper and your school's website.
- d. Publish a 1-2 page newsletter about your organization's members, activities etc., and circulate to all members and interested parties including students' parents.
- e. Create a blog for your organization that students can follow and that is easy to access.

Remember, change takes place slowly, but if you begin to implement each of these ideas and others that you may come up with, you will experience greater involvement within your organization.

Conclusion

Keeping any organization up and running, with an active membership is one that requires strategic planning, strong commitment, and thorough involvement on the part of everyone in the organization. Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) identified several "capacities" that organizations must develop that are crucial to their success: member capacity, relational capacity, organizational capacity and programmatic capacity.

In case of 'member capacity', Foster-Fishman's research showed the need for a diverse skill set among members, so that they can contribute towards the various needs of the organization such as technical requirements, planning, fund raising, etc. Member capacity requires a strong commitment on the part of the organization to support its members so they can take part in organizational activities.

In the 'relational capacity', there is a need for strong internal dynamics, to address conflict management and resolution among members; and a positive external dynamics through which the organization builds lasting connections with the wider campus community and beyond, in order to garnish support for itself and to expand its horizons.

In terms of 'organizational capacity' some of the key elements involve a strong and committed leadership, a clear assignment of roles and responsibilities, and an orientation towards constant learning.

Finally, 'programmatic capacity' involves identifying the issues most pertinent to the membership and working towards them.



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While Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) focused on community organizations in their study, these guidelines also apply to student organizations. The strengths of an organization, as well as its vitality depend on good communication, fair and equitable involvement, and democratic methods of operation, so that all members feel included.

It might seem like a daunting task, but with persistence and commitment, it is possible to have a thriving student organization that should have a significant impact on your campus and in the wider community. Some of the most impressive political changes this country has witnessed were initiated by a group of motivated students on college campuses.

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