

Student Programming for Generation NeXt: Maintaining Program Support, Facilitating Persistence, Reaching Developmental Outcomes

Today's traditionally aged students from Generation NeXt are different. They have characteristics and expectations that present unique challenges to everyone on campus charged with teaching, serving and supervising them through their university experience, including campus activity programmers. Their issues with academic preparation, responsibility and self-esteem, consumer expectations, use of technology and styles of interacting can impact, and interfere with, their learning, persistence and academic success at school, and workplace readiness and success. There is fairly compelling evidence that they are not responding particularly well to traditional instruction in terms of learning outcomes and workplace readiness.

Campus programming can help. Entertainment programs can facilitate persistence by making the campus an attractive place to be. Other programming can also help students reach developmental and unique learning outcomes with the right kind of programs.

Today's Students

The majority of today's students are under 27 and so from Generation NeXt, especially those who are residential, full time and participate in programming. The wanted, precious, protected children of the "Baby Boomlet" they are very different from the tough, adaptable, pragmatic, independent, self-responsible students from Generation X who came to campus before them. There is abundant evidence, as noted in Academically Adrift by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska, Our Underachieving Colleges by Derek Bok, and PBS in Declining by Degrees, that traditional academic approaches, while never best practices, are not bring about meaningful, lasting learning outcomes or workplace readiness in many students. Mel Levine in Ready or Not, Here Life Comes described "a pandemic of workplace unreadiness". The same old-same old is just not working in academics, and many constituencies are crying for accountability and reform.

While traditional class-based learning outcomes are not the responsibility of campus activity programmers, accountability is becoming a major concern around all expenditures and uses of resources. They are two kinds of campuses; those where campus activity programmers have been called on to demonstrate their effectiveness, and those where they will be called upon to demonstrate their effectiveness. Entertainment and developmental programming needs to reflect an understanding of the changes in today's learners, their developmental issues and needs, and be prepared to demonstrate impact and outcomes.

Meet Generation NeXt

While Generation NeXt is not a homogenous group, a set of modal traits and characteristic of concern can be seen. The following features may be of special concern to campus activity programmers.

Programmed. Unlike the free range children of the Baby Boom generation, or the latch-key kids of Generation X, NeXters have had more structure and programming throughout their lives. From day care and child development centers at an early age through structured, scheduled activities during their school years, they have had less unsupervised, unstructured time. This should make them good candidates for campus activity programming, though they might have had fewer naturally occurring opportunities to develop skills in making good choices on their own which would lead them to voluntarily attending developmental programs.

Utilitarian. This generation does not do anything just because it is what they are supposed to do. For them to participate in any activity, they need to understand very clearly what is in it for them. The more optional the activity (meaning not connected to a course credit) the clearer the benefits need to be. Campus activity programmers do understand the motivator for students to seek the benefit of “have a good time”, and so to attend entertainment programming. Desired outcomes, or student benefits, around learning or developmental goals might be more slippery. Campus activity programmers might remember the marketing maxim “don’t sell attributes; sell benefits.”

Closer to parents. Parents of Generation NeXt students are more willing to “help” in many ways. This assistance may interfere with the developmental opportunities offered when students manage difficult situations on their own. NeXters might be expected to bring more developmental issues to campus in terms of responsibility, resilience, autonomy, purpose and willingness to work hard. Parents also help school personnel remember their fiduciary responsibilities to students, which makes programming around risk management issues more important.

Successful. Today’s college students studied less in high school, and they received higher grades. There is great variety among college and university campuses as to how this translates into college success. While some schools allow this pattern to continue, most instructors’ expectations come as a great shock to many students. This mismatch between what worked in high school and the academic effort required to be successful in college has a great cost as it impacts student persistence.

Wired. Having moved through a childhood dominated by television, video and games into an adolescent social life dominated by the web, social networking and text messaging, NeXters have a very different reality, and a blurring of the virtual and the real. The expectations of these “digital natives” (as named by Marc Prensky) for immediacy and personalization can make traditionally scheduled programming difficult, especially with the myriad of choices available on-line anytime, on-demand. Some have suggested that with so much communication having shifted from verbal and face to face to on-line and text, NeXters may have had fewer opportunities to develop a rich repertoire of interpersonal skills.

Rethinking programs.

Recognizing the depth and breadth of the developmental needs of NeXter students, the limited impact current academic practices are having on their development, the increases in accountability facing everyone in higher education and the need to articulate and demonstrate effectiveness around persistence and student change, campus activity programmers might reevaluate their entertainment and developmental programming.

Fun counts.

It is surprisingly easy to make a case for the value of student entertainment programming. Some escapist fun in a challenging academic environment can facilitate student persistence. The work of Vince Tinto on student persistence, George Kuh on student engagement, and Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini on how college impacts students all point to the importance of an engaging school environment and an atmosphere that makes college a place where students want to be and where they can easily and conveniently connect with others. Campus activity programming can facilitate student's engagement with other students, with faculty and staff, and with the institution. It is helpful if campus activity programmers can track who attend events to demonstrate that students who participate in programming do persist, are more successful academically, more involved in other developmental activities or participate at higher rates in services known to improve student persistence and success, like career and academic support services. Brief "plugs" for these services at events might be sufficient to create such a demonstrable correlation. When these "fun" events are also interactive, there may be greatest benefit.

Making a Difference though Developmental Programming.

Connecting theory to practice in developmental programming may be the greater challenge. When campus activity programmers can demonstrate that their efforts bring about meaningful student outcomes, the program and the programmers become more valued and likely to be recognized as integral to the school's mission, beyond providing fun to keep students in school so the academic programs can do their work. Campus activity programmers working on leadership, team building, workplace/ real world readiness, positive attitudes, making good choices, diversity or avoiding high risk behavior might consider the following in planning, choosing program providers and measuring outcomes.

Clear learning and developmental outcomes. Developmental programming should have clear goals. Assuming that most college graduates will need gainful employment at some point in their lives to support themselves (even graduates from liberal arts colleges) the new framework of 21st century skills from the National Research Council might inform programming choices. These include:

Cognitive skills including nonroutine problem solving, critical thinking, and systems thinking

Interpersonal skills including complex communication, social skills, team-work, cultural sensitivity, and dealing with diversity

Intrapersonal skills including self-management, time management, self-development, self-regulation, adaptability, and executive functioning.

Evidence suggests that, while employers value these skills and they will be of increasing importance in the workplace of the future, evidence of success on students developing these skills is sketchy. These are the kind of skills that can be developed in programs addressing skills development directly, or programs that incorporate, develop and use the skills around other content, such as diversity programming that also develops social skills and teamwork. Using one program to bring about multiple developmental outcomes is a very effective and elegant use of time and resources. Programs that develop these skills should also be valued by the college community and administration, and enterprising programmers should be able to sell them to students based on the future benefit.

Student activity boards deserve special mention as powerful developmental opportunities for students. As the processes of the boards seek to help students develop the skills listed above, they are especially effective.

Technological sophistication. Today's wired, digital students have little taste or patience for "talking head" lectures or programs. Developmental programming featuring a "speaker" should also include evidence of digital sophistication to offer the speaker credibility. Why should students believe the speaker or the content are relevant if the methods and process of the program do not recognize the reality and available resources of their on-line, tech-intense world? Videos, linking to relevant web resources in real time and using live stream feedback like TodaysMeet.com can make programs more effective. Audience response systems "clickers", like those offered by Turning Technologies, help keep students engaged and offer powerful, on-going feedback to presenters.

Interaction. Presenters should not strive to talk to students, they should seek to talk with students. Just as the unidirectional lecture should be eradicated from the classroom, it should be rarely be a part of developmental programming. The use of audience response systems "clickers" and live stream feedback like TodaysMeet.com, as mentioned above, are excellent way to facilitate interaction even in "sage on the stage" programs. Opportunities for live interaction with the speaker, facilitated interaction with other students in dyads or small groups or follow-up activities coordinated by campus activity programmers increase student's ability to individualize, identify with and apply the content to themselves and their goals, and so can improve developmental outcomes. This might be especially important with the wired students of Generation NeXt.

(conclusion)

Today's students are different. The need for good campus activity programming to help student persistence and development has never been greater, nor has there ever been a greater emphasis on showing the effectiveness of programming. As campus activity programmers keep in mind that the purpose of entertainment programs is to help keep students in school, they can make program selection decisions based on predicted

retention efficacy, and start to make efforts to correlate program attendance with persistence. Developmental programming that has clear developmental outcomes, shows technological sophistication and is interactive, especially around workplace readiness issues, will have the kind of impacts most important and meaningful to students, and respected and valued by the rest of the campus community.

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