



Chapter Eight

Off-Site Programming: Taking Students Off Campus as an Involvement Activity

By Leslie Heusted

The Off-Campus Programming Contribution to Student Involvement

When determining a well-rounded student activities program, it is common to consider all options of involvement. Off-campus programming, whether it be a trip to the city or utilizing a community venue, may play into developing this comprehensive program development. While these opportunities enhance the involvement opportunities that are “widely acknowledged as a way to improve retention (Rentz, Saddlemire, p. 267),” they also create many questions specific to the off-campus activity. It is the student affairs professional who is charged with anticipating and answering some of the inherent risks that exist with taking students off campus.

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Why Explore Off-Campus Programming?

Whether a campus location is rural or metropolitan, students can benefit from off-campus programming. Activities and events that are planned and sponsored by outside organizations can often more easily fit into the budget of activities programs rather than sponsoring the event on campus.

The “isolated campus” (colleges located in settings geographically isolated from a larger metropolitan city or community) find it important to plan activities and events off campus to connect students to those areas that might provide more exposure to the “issues, problems and challenges of the outside world” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, p. 306). There are also social activities and events that happen in larger met-

ropolitan areas that can be explored by students in the safety of a group setting.

Campuses that are in surrounded locations are institutions located in or near a city that often utilize the resources of the city for programming and educational purposes outside of the classroom. These trips or excursions may be less time-intensive in terms of travel, but still require the same care and planning in order to ensure safety and responsibility of the institution and the students involved in the trip.

Whatever the location of the community, off-campus programming allows the programming board to be involved in introducing and exploring educational opportunities beyond the walls of the institution. It may help build ties with the community and expand the horizons of the educational experience of the student body.

Types of Off-Campus Programs

There are many types of programs that could be considered off campus. The following represents a limited listing of activities that can fall into this category.

- **Conferences (including alternative spring breaks)**—These involve students who are attending a conference sponsored by their institution for their area of study or an outside-of-the-classroom involvement (student activities, residential life, sorority/fraternity involvement, etc.).
- **Excursions or Day/Evening Trips** (including community service projects)—These are trips close enough in proximity to the campus that the departing, transporting, participating and returning can happen within a day.
- **Shuttle Services**—These are services that transport and drop off students to a variety of locations.
- **Spring Break or Winter Break Trips**—These activities take place over an extended amount of time (most often a week) and are dependent upon the institution for transportation and accommodations, but often do not require scheduling of activities throughout the duration of time on the trip.

Although each of these represent a different degree of being off campus, each requires the same amount of care and planning in determining the safety of the students involved and the responsibility of the institution involved in sponsoring the trip.

How to Approach Planning an Off-Campus Program

Assessing Where to Go

Before determining the trip or excursion, it is important to assess the needs of the student population and campus with regard to the opportunities off-campus programming can provide. Students' desire to leave campus and the activities they choose to participate in off campus vary from location to location. Like any other program, assessing your student population through surveys, focus groups or suggestions generated by your programming board can help you determine the best ways to utilize the resources required to take your students off campus.

The Planning Process

The distinction between private and public institutions has a profound effect on the steps required to legally and safely plan your off-campus program. Private institutions typically have "more latitude to deal with students and their organizations than have public institutions" (Dunkel, Schuh, p. 170). Public institutions and their officers are fully subject to the constraints of the federal Constitution, whereas private institutions and their officers are not (Kaplin and Lee, 1995). Regardless of this distinction, "Both private and public institutions must follow their own published rules; such rules should be reasonably specific, neither too vague nor too broad" (Barr, 1996). The bottom line is that it is required for any student activities professional to consult their legal department when determining the parameters and guidelines of off-campus programming. Sometimes these rules are governed by liability considerations while other issues pertain to definition of responsibility and safety regarding the students involved.

Transportation

Reasonably, the issue of transportation of students to and from the activity identified is a point of concern for off-campus programs. Undoubtedly, the safest way to travel is to use a common carrier, meaning commercial transportation. When a common carrier is used, the risk associated with the trip is in effect partially transferred to the carrier. This approach assumes that the carrier is licensed to do business, does not have a history of accidents and has not experienced any other problems (Dunkel & Schuh, p. 176).

Often, cost issues require that other means of transportation are secured when taking trips off campus. If this is the case, consult your campus safety office or your legal department to learn and adhere to the rules

that are in place to ensure safe transportation. If a university has a vehicle fleet, they may set forth rules for access to those vehicles. Many campuses require that drivers of university vehicles be certified through a self-administered program. Others may determine that a commercial driver's license is required in order to operate a multi-passenger vehicle. This may be especially applicable in the case of administering a shuttle route for your students. When assessing the best mode of transportation, it is of utmost importance to follow the procedure defined by your university.

If questions remain about who can drive your vehicles, or if your campus does not have a vehicle program, the following points (adapted from Dunkel & Schuh, 1998) may be helpful in determining who may transport your students to your off-campus event.

1. All drivers should have a valid operating license.
2. No drivers should have a history of speeding tickets, reckless driving, driving while intoxicated or any other problems that would lead one to conclude they are not prudent operators of vehicles. In short, all drivers should have a clean record.
3. All drivers and vehicles should be insured.
4. All vehicles should be in good operating condition.
5. No vehicles should be operated in a fashion that is not consistent with how the vehicle was designed—for example, overloaded with passengers and luggage, or with passengers riding in the open bed of a truck. (According to a 2003 report from the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, it is important to note that 15-passenger van rollover risks are greatly increased when 10 or more people ride in the vans, due to the passenger weight shifting the center of gravity up and back. Under these conditions, the van has less resistance to rollovers and handles differently than other vehicles of a similar size)
6. No driver should be at the wheel for an extended period of time. Drivers should be rotated to avoid fatigue.
7. No person should be allowed to drive after consuming alcoholic beverages.

Although many of these points may be assumed by you, it is best to make your expectations clear to individuals before they commit to driving for the activity.

Behavioral Expectations

Although behavioral expectations are put forth in any activity, those that are held on campus are governed by campus norms and community rules. When taking students off campus, determining up front what behavior is expected from the students becomes paramount. Once this is established, students can then make an informed decision about their participation in the event. Chief concerns involve the amount of control students have in their activities once reaching the named destination, the expectation regarding alcohol consumption, and any consequences that will result from expectations not being met. These are easily established in a fact sheet or FAQ about the event, an informational meeting before the event or contract or agreement

form that a student signs before making payment or as a commitment to attend the event.

Emergency Information

It is always advised to collect emergency information from students before transporting them off campus. (See the sample emergency information form in Appendix D.) This information can include emergency contact information, any allergies experienced by the student and insurance information in case of an accident. The level of risk associated with the activity will determine the amount of information required. Not only is this information helpful to the staff person/student coordinator accompanying students on the trip, it is also helpful for a copy to be left on campus for quick referral by the staff/students who may not be on the trip but are called upon in case of an emergency.

Legal Issues to Consider

Managing Risk

From the beginning of planning an off-campus event, it is important for the programming board and activities professionals to accept that this type of event will inherently possess more risk than an on-campus program. In other words, these programs require a different type of care and intentionality in planning than an event that occurs on campus. Once this reality is accepted, it is easier to take the needed precautions to protect you, the organization and, ultimately, the institution from liability risks.

Before determining the trip or excursion, it is as important to assess the needs of the student population and campus with regard to the opportunities off-campus programming can provide.

A (Non-Exhaustive) List of Off-campus Programming Options

- Holiday shopping/outlet malls
- Comedy club
- Paint ball
- Rock climbing
- Amusement park/water park
- Progressive dinner
- Float trip
- Camping trip
- Museum tours
- Local (or not so local) tourist attractions
- Performing arts/theatre
- Laser Tag
- Fishing
- Roller skating/skate park
- Major or minor sporting events
- Fan buses to university sporting events
- First-run movies at a theatre
- Shuttle services to local discount centers/services
- Bowling/techno or late-night
- Zoo visits
- Participating in local walks/runs for charity
- Ice skating
- Visiting local historical districts
- Holiday celebrations/parades

Be sure to target the audience who may be most interested in your off-campus activities by identifying majors, academic programs and interns who are working in that area of study (i.e. theatre students for a trip to the theatre, science students for a trip to the local botanical gardens, history students for a trip to a museum or local historical district).

Understanding Your Duty of Care

In order to completely understand your responsibility in managing risk, you must first know the definition of a tort. “A tort is generally defined as a civil wrong other than a breach of a contract for which the courts will provide a remedy in the form of damages” (Gehring, 1987, p. 137). In this case, the most common tort is negligence. “Negligence demands that a duty of care be breached; and as a result, an injury occurs. The duty or standard of care may be breached by an act of omission or commission” (Gehring, 1987, p. 161).

There are three elements that must be present in order for negligence to be proven (Barr, 1988b):

1. The defendant owed a duty of care to the claimant.

2. The defendant breached that duty.

3. The breach of duty was the proximate cause of the injury.

In this context, the general standard in this situation is that you must behave like a “reasonable person,” that is, behave the way a reasonable person would in a similar situation. The responsibility of the programming board and the advisor in application to an off-campus event remains in identifying, reviewing and minimizing the risks inherent to the activity. Thus, anticipating problems and supplying solutions prior to the event by way of information sharing and relaying specific and definitive guidelines can greatly reduce the risk and manage the experience of the students involved in the activity (Barr 1988b).

The best way to approach this process is to implement consistency in your off-campus events. While the nature of the events changes depending on the activity, it is possible for your programming board to require the same information and protocol for each trip. This not only ensures that your programming board is acting with a consistent duty of care, but also creates an environment of common understanding of the nature of the event.

Steps to Take to Protect Your Students and Your Institution

1. Clearly define the event and its beginning and ending points with regard to the involvement of students.
2. Supply, whenever appropriate, written documentation of the guidelines and parameters that will govern the activity. Depending on the activity, this may be best communicated in an agreement for the participating students to sign. Waivers are often used as an attempt to absolve the organization or institution of any injury that may result in participating in the activity. More importantly, and often more effectively, a waiver is a useful tool in communicating and documenting the risk associated with the activity in a common, understood language. (See the sample event waiver and hold harmless agreement in Appendix D.)
3. If the off-campus activity requires an elevated level of risk, an informational meeting explaining this risk may be advised to ensure that all students attending the event have the same understanding of these risks before they participate.
4. Collect emergency information from those participating for use in case of an accident.
5. Depending on the level of risk, there are cases in which additional insurance can be purchased by those involved in planning the excursion. This step should be taken when advised by the institution’s

legal department that this coverage is worthy of its additional cost.

Fully evaluate the event in order to improve upon the excursion experience in the future. Make adjustments based on suggestions given by the participants to ensure the satisfaction of future off-campus activities.

A Word About Spring Breaks

In the current world of online travel agents, bidding systems and packages available through different Web sites, the ability for student activities boards to effectively plan and implement a “break” trip has become less attractive as an activity opportunity. Not only are there concerns about the risks involved, there is also the very real challenge of not being able to deliver the best deal to your students in a group package. Working with a travel agency that specializes in student travel and has access to discounts for group travel may be the best route to take if your programming board is interested in making this type of activity available to your student body. By partnering with a travel agency, you are able to get the word out to your students while taking advantage of the discounts and services afforded by the agency. However, by entering into this agreement, you also forfeit much of the control over the event and its purpose.

About the Author

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