



Chapter Four

Late-Night Programming: A Successful—and Safe—Social and Entertainment Alternative

Late-night programming has begun to emerge on a number of college campuses as an attractive alternative for students seeking recreational and social activities on nights and weekends—especially that period extending from Thursday through Sunday evenings. A growing trend in recent years, late night programming has been the topic of packed educational sessions at NACA and ACUI conventions and has been implemented with much success at a number of NACA-member schools (S. Kuhn, personal communication, Sept. 19, 2002).

Why Move Into the Late-Night Arena?

Student activities professionals and student programmers are usually among the most involved staff and volunteers on campus and already provide a wealth of entertainment and social opportunities for students. Why add another programming alternative to a schedule that typically is already very full?

A concern for student health and safety is one answer that comes immediately from those who've offered late-night programming. Such programming is often viewed as a way to help students avoid negative

social situations and/or behaviors that can lead to such tragic outcomes as “fatal car accident[s], date rape or death from alcohol poisoning” (Waltrip, p. 36). According to US Department of Health and Human Services figures, “it is estimated that, of the 10.4 million 12-20 year olds who drink alcohol, 29.4% are classified as binge drinkers, and 6.0% are classified as heavy drinkers” (Latta, p. 39). Additionally, “Wechsler and Kuo [2000] reported that in 1999 approximately two of five students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities were ‘binge’ or ‘high risk’ drinkers” (Latta, p. 39).

Furthermore, with the legal drinking age being 21 in most parts of the US, drinking of any sort, regardless as to whether it can be categorized as “binge” or “high risk,” is in fact illegal for the majority of college students who fall into the traditional 18-22 year old age bracket.

With these considerations in mind, it may be incumbent upon student programming organizations to consider activities that are intrinsically alcohol-free or that distract students from drinking and the harmful and/or illegal behaviors that may result.

This is where late-night programming can be extremely helpful. Assessment of existing late-night programs has shown that when such programming is available to students, negative alcohol-related behaviors decrease.

At Penn State, for example, “73% of the students attending late-night events said it resulted in less drinking for themselves and 76% indicated the activities contributed positively to the Penn State environment. At West Virginia [University-Morgantown], the late-night program decreased the number of incidents at the hospital during weekend evenings, and the Department of Safety and Residence life reported a decrease in incidents during the times of their UP All Night program” (Latta, p. 43).

In addition to enhancing the health and safety of students, late-night programming ventures can bring interesting programming alternatives to campus, as well as increase collaboration among existing clubs and organizations.

Again, with Penn State’s late night programming as an example, a collaboration between student activities and the school’s Soaring Club resulted in a display featuring an actual small plane in the student union. The display was a hit with students, who “had the opportunity to climb into the plane and see the equipment and learn how it worked” (S. Mortensen, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2002).

Collaborative efforts at Penn State have also resulted in other unusual activities, such as ballroom dancing and juggling demonstrations, and have allowed clubs to have unique recruitment opportunities to bring new members into their organizations (Mortensen).

How Do You Begin a Late-night Program?

If you are interested in bringing late-night programming to your campus, how do you begin? To start with, you will need to determine if late-night programming will be viable on your campus.

At the West Virginia University-Morgantown, one of the initial efforts was to conduct focus groups (E. Andrews, personal communication, Sept. 19, 2002). However, conducting focus groups is just one way to begin. You may also engage in such information gathering activities as conducting surveys and evaluating student feedback. Refer to “Chapter Three: Deciding What to Program” for helpful information in these areas, as well as in identifying needs of your campus community and determining programming options.

You may also learn by example. If you already know that another campus with a similar student demographic is succeeding with late-night programming, you might contact or visit them to learn how they got

started. That was the case with the University of Florida. After seeing a published article about West Virginia University-Morgantown’s WVU All Night! program, the University of Florida sent a representative to West Virginia to learn more about its program and determine what it would take to initiate such a program at the University of Florida (Waltrip, p. 37).

Such site visits, if practical, along with networking via telephone, e-mail and the Internet, as well as at NACA regional conferences and National Conventions, can serve as valuable ways to get ideas and gather information that will be helpful in creating your own late-night program at your school. Ask questions of those who’ve already implemented such programming, see what did and didn’t work and learn from others’ mistakes (Waltrip, p. 39).

However, there are a number of unique issues that must be addressed if late-night programming is to be successful in offering students appealing and safe entertainment alternatives.

TIP:

Programming featuring food and films are generally successful in the late-night setting. However, theme-based programs, dances, crafts, games and music work well, too.

Student “Buy-In” and Administrative Support

Student “buy-in” and administrative support are crucial to the success of a late-night program. In fact, student-initiated and student-driven efforts may be the most successful over the long-term (Andrews). Student initiatives have indeed been responsible for some of the more successful late-night programs, such as those offered by West Virginia University-Morgantown and Penn State. Student leaders at both schools felt there weren’t enough safe entertainment alternatives on evenings and weekends and took it upon themselves to do something about it (Andrews, Mortensen).

Administrative support is key to late-night programming success because such endeavors require sustained effort, sometimes exhaustive staff and student resources, and can be very expensive (Mortensen, Andrews, Kuhn, & Waltrip). If there is no investment on the part of the university and no effective student/staff partnerships, the program will

Late-Night Programming Checklist

- Determine if/why you should offer late-night programming on your campus.
- Decide how to begin your program.
- Attract student “buy-in” and administrative support.
- Weigh the budgetary implications.
- Address specific challenges:
 - Staffing/Volunteers
 - Timing
 - Venues
- Determine what kind of programming will work best on your campus.
- Assess your program and establish strategic directions.
- Have fun with it!

not succeed (Mortensen). Some schools have been fortunate in that administrators were willing to re-allocate funds to support late night programming or create full-time positions responsible for overseeing late-night efforts (Mortensen).

The “continued success and popularity of ... programs ... have a direct relationship to the support they receive from the president of the university” (Latta, p. 40). Citing programs at Penn State, West Virginia University-Morgantown and Michigan State as examples, Latta pointed out that “at each campus, the president (and other senior level staff) was involved in the formation of the original planning teams for the late-night programming effort and continues to play close attention to each program. This type level support has not only helped to secure resources human and fiscal, it has helped to publicize the program to prospective students, alumni, faculty and the media” (p. 40).

As these examples show, it is indeed possible for student-initiated efforts to attract the support of the powers-that-be on campus, and is, in fact, essential that they do so. As you begin to plan your own late-night series, confer with your advisor about how to approach your administration and to determine which administrators you should specifically contact. As you will see later in this chapter, you may be asking for considerable financial as well as moral support and you will want to put your best foot forward.

Financial Considerations of Late-Night Programming

Successful late-night programming can be a rather expensive endeavor. As you begin your planning, review “Chapter Two: The Budget” for guidance on how to plan the fiscal aspects of your new programming venture.

Late-night programming can become costly in part because of the frequency of the events that are offered. Some schools offer programs on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights of each week (Andrews). In addition to such items as performer’s fees and movie rentals, door prizes and decorations (Mortensen), most late-night programs feature food, which can be one of the largest expenses involved (Waltrip, p. 39).

How much can a year’s worth of late-night programming cost? Plenty. For example, at the University of Florida, the initial budget for its late-night program came to approximately \$300,000 and included “estimated costs for weekly programs like movies, novelties and bands or comedians,” as well as additional staffing costs (Waltrip, p. 37).

At Penn State, the late-night program has required an annual budget ranging from approximately \$250,000 to \$400,000. And the funds have never been guaranteed from one year to the next. The student activities board must present its proposal to the school’s fee board each year (Mortensen). Administrative allocations are just one place to seek funds, however. Some programming organizations have become creative in fund-raising, tapping into the generosity of alumni, parents of current students, the corporate sector, and even US Department of Education grants pursued through the school’s development office (Mortensen).

You may need to employ this kind of fiscal flexibility in footing the bill for your own late-night programming series. To recap ways you can seek funds, consider the following strategies:

- Seek activity fee support.
- Establish a program proposal with the university or department development office so that potential donors are aware of the late-night program, its popularity, and ways it could be expanded.
- As corporate partnerships are developed, consider including support for late-night programming as a part of the proposal.
- Develop a strategy with student organizations for fund-raising opportunities to support late-night programming.
- Work with the campus grants office to research and write grant proposals.
- Charge a nominal amount for some events.

- Solicit support from the president's office (Latta, p. 43).

Other Specific Challenges to Be Addressed

Late-night programming can come with its own set of unique challenges that student programmers and staff must deal with if such ventures are to be successful and ongoing.

As indicated above, financial support can be foremost among those challenges. However, student “buy-in,” adequate staffing and a large volunteer pool, prevention of staff burnout, and the availability of suitable venues also require attention. In addition, the timing of certain events must be taken into consideration.

Staffing/Volunteer Pool

Late-night programming can be a very staff intensive undertaking. Even if a successful program is indeed student driven, it still requires a large volunteer pool and significant effort and support from full-time and/or graduate staff (Kuhn).

“Without question, the issue of staffing is one of the most important elements of a successful late-night program. Whether supervising the late-night program is a part of one staff member's job or several staff support the program, having creative, flexible, collaborative, and resourceful staff is essential. Supervision of late-night staff must be sensitive to the unique challenges for this type of programming. Developing a comprehensive set of activities that meets the diverse needs of the campus, takes into account student input, is fresh and exciting, changes each week, and requires staff to be available until 4 or 5 am on weekends, can lead to staff burnout and turnover. Balancing the daily administration duties along with the evening programming challenges, creating good relationships with the operational security, and being flexible and patient all contribute to a healthy perspective for late-night staff.” (Latta p. 40).

At the University of Florida, for example, functions such as swiping ID's, covering entrances and serving food has required up to 30 people per event (Waltrip, p. 38).

How do you secure the necessary staffing, both paid and volunteer? A number of approaches may be helpful.

At the University of Florida, for example, the programming board has offered weekly “food scholarships” good at the campus caterer to student groups who volunteer to help staff their late-night events. Also, the late-night program “is listed as a volunteer opportunity for students and organizations looking

for community service sites” (Waltrip, p. 38).

As was previously mentioned, at Penn State, a full-time position was created that is responsible for supervising the late-night program, including ensuring that it is fully staffed for each event (Mortensen, 2002).

Latta recommends “an internship or assistantship in late-night programming is an excellent way to network with a student affairs or higher education graduate program and provide a meaningful learning opportunity for future professionals. Graduate students can provide new programming ideas, help to supervise student staff and work with student organizations and provide some assistance to support the full-time staff” (p. 40).

Student “Buy-In”

To achieve student “buy-in,” you must offer programming that your fellow students will find appealing—appealing enough, in fact, to draw them away from other events in the community that might be very alluring but not as safe as what you hope to offer. (See the following section, “What Works Best?,” for more information on the kinds of programming that might appeal to most students.) This can be a big challenge, but that is where pre-program surveys, focus groups and the like come in.

Students must also be involved in designing and running your program if it is to succeed (Andrews). Consider involving other organizations on campus in addition to your programming board, either in assisting in running events or in offering specific programming (Mortensen).

“... Using student organizations to coordinate the programming agenda brings with it a built-in support network and commitment to ensuring success. Student organizations often have access to programming resources, funds, staffing, equipment, etc., that office budgets often lack. This collaborative approach has many positive benefits for both the late-night program and for developing an integrated campus community” (Latta, p. 40).

Timing of Events

Late-night programming is offered, of course, at night—during what Penn State University's late-night programming mission statement describes as “prime social times” (Latta, p. 39). Since the goal of most late-night programming is to “provide an attractive alternative to nightclubs and house parties” (Latta, p. 40), it might be wisest to schedule late-night events during the same times that house parties would be taking place or that nightclubs would normally be open. That time block is usually from 9 pm until 2 am.

One important thing to remember is to schedule your late-night events in such a way that they don't

allow students to come to your events after they attend a party or go to a bar. For example, West Virginia University-Morgantown schedules its Friday and Saturday free breakfast buffets from midnight until 2:30 am. If the buffets were open later than that, students might feel encouraged to come by for breakfast after leaving the bars, thereby defeating part of the purpose of the program (Andrews).

A Typical Weekend Late-Night Programming Schedule

Penn State University-University Park

Thursday

8:30 pmMovie
9 pm.....A cappella concert

Friday

9 pm.....Slow waltz dance lessons
9 pm-1 am.....Creative crafts
10 pmBingo
10 pm-1 amCasino Night
10 pm-1 am.....Silver Circle
10 pm-2 am.....Table tennis
MidnightValentine Bingo

White Building (Student Rec Center) Activities:

Basketball league
Fitness center and aerobics class
Open recreation and swimming pool

Saturday

9 pm-1 am.....Creative crafts
9 pm-2 amOpen games night
9:30 pm-2:30 am.....Bucking bull
10 pm-1 am.....CHAZAK
10 pm-2 amTable tennis
10:30 pm.....Local H concert

White Building Activities:

Badminton and table tennis league
Open recreation and swimming pool
Fitness center and aerobics class

7 pm, 9:30 pm, and Midnight: Movie
7 pm, 9:30 pm, and Midnight: Movie (Latta, p. 41)

Consistent Venues

It's important to have a convenient, consistent space designated for a late-night programming series. Sometimes, depending upon the campus, that requires some creativity due to competition for available space. At Penn State, for example, there are approximately 600 student clubs and organizations wanting to use the student union for events, so on occasion the cafeteria has been put into service as entertainment space (Mortensen).

At Michigan State, the student union building is not centrally located due to the way the campus has evolved since it was first established. Therefore, the school's programming board has used classrooms to show films (Kuhn).

At West Virginia University-Morgantown, the breakfast buffet has been set up in a hallway in the student union (Andrews).

Whatever alternative venues you pursue, above all be sure that they are available on an ongoing basis and that they will meet the needs of your specific events.

What Works Best?

What kind of programming is best suited to be offered in a late-night setting? While surveys, focus groups and other assessment tools might help you determine what will be most successful on your campus, late-night programming practitioners attest to several kinds of offerings that work well in the late night category. Food and films seem to lead the list, but there are others that prove successful:

- Theme-based programs: student-selected theme is incorporated into all programs that weekend
- Dances and dance lessons
- Movies
- Casino night
- Arts and crafts
- Bingo
- Music: jazz, a cappella, rock, alternative
- Customized programs presented by student organizations
- Games: board games, video, laser tag
- Novelty events: Wax Hands, Fantasy Foto, Videokie
- Student talent shows
- Student performing arts groups (Latta, p. 42)

Additional Advice

In addition to programming the kinds of events listed above, consider the following suggestions to help make your late-night programming venture successful:

- Ask questions; see what worked elsewhere. Learn from our mistakes.
- Involve student planners and staff as much as possible. This helps invest them in the program and helps save your energy and sanity.
- Develop a logo and a theme for your publicity, and use them consistently. Recognition of your program is vital when you have publicity going up week after week. It's important for students to realize the flyers they see posted are for new, upcoming programs and not a two-week old notice for a program that has already taken place. Along those lines, make sure your old stuff comes down when the new publicity goes out. (Editor's note: For more complete guidelines on publicizing your late-night program, turn to "Chapter Five: Promoting the Program.")
- Utilize your counterparts across campus, especially in housing, to help with this kind of programming effort. A program of this size and scope impacts much more than one office or department, and most campus areas that can help you also recognize the value of a successful program of this type. Bring campus offices such as residence life, recreational sports, food service and campus police into the conversation early on.
- Keep it fresh! While we offer the same basic schedule week after week, the coordinator is constantly looking for ways to increase the variety of programming and extend exposure to new populations (Waltrip, p. 39).

Your late night program will not be static—for it to enjoy the success you envision, it will always be evolving. Therefore, it will need continuing strategic direction. Consider the following from strategic directions pursued by Michigan State, West Virginia University-Morgantown and Penn State as you develop your own:

- Increase corporate support for programs and secure more permanent funding.
- Develop a better and more integrated marketing program.
- Maintain a high level of programming quality and offerings.
- Increase attendance at non-movie events.
- Strengthen the academic component and participation.
- Review safety and security issues.
- Promote a greater student ownership of the late-night program (Latta, p. 44).

No matter why you enter into the brave new world of late-night programming, one clear benefit is likely to be a reduction in behaviors associated with high-risk drinking, and that in itself makes it a good thing to do on behalf of students (Latta p. 44).

One final thing to remember as you implement your own late-night programming is to have fun as you do it (Waltrip, p. 39). After all, safe entertainment alternatives that are full of fun are the name of the game when it comes to late-night programming.

References

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Additional Reading

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