

Members Behaving Badly

Mind your manners at conferences

by Anna Marie Neri

Picture this: you're at a leadership conference off campus, and everything is going well until the first night. All of a sudden, as if a full moon has taken effect, other schools' representatives turn what was once a productive event into an out-of-control party. Do you join in on the drinking, hook-ups, and noise making? If you're a true leader, then you'll know better than that and will want to earn respect, not lose it. Here are some tips on how to make a lasting, positive impression about the quality of your school's student leaders while at conferences.

Preparing Your Groups' Psyche

Discuss whether a conference is a perk or an investment, and what's expected of those who attend. "I let it be known that when we represent the University of Virginia we have to act at a higher standard," says Jason Bradfield, student president of the Jefferson Leadership Foundation. "We go a step further to be polite, socialize about topics pertinent to the conference, and to have a positive attitude."

At Black Hawk College in Illinois, Student Government leaders not only talk about what is expected, but also what the consequences will be for misconduct. "Usually, we make sure to set clear parameters before we go," says Linda Olson, SG support-staff leader. "They know they aren't there just for fun. It helps to have a frank discussion up front. As long as we've agreed on a set of ground rules, we avoid problems and we have a clearer way of dealing with them. The students would be fully aware of the consequences, of maybe not being a candidate to attend future conferences. Some students receive academic credit for SG, and misbehavior could affect their grade, too."

In Ohio, Lorain County Community College leaders show how important communication is by sometimes prepping students over the phone if they're not present for the conference preparation meeting. "I tend to have a short session with the students before conferences to remind them to enjoy themselves but to remember that they represent our school and must do so appropriately," says Rodger Campbell, program coordinator for student life. "It can be both a holiday and hard work. While you learn, there's also the chance to socialize and meet peers. However, I request that they be attentive and ask questions. Those are my basic expectations. I don't agree that conference attendance is an earned right for everyone. It's a unique privilege. A right, to me, is an automatic. I think that only if people are truly dedicated and serious about their organization that then it can maybe be considered a right."

To ensure that your entire contingent is on the same wavelength, allow group members to contribute their ideas for appropriate behavior or create a daily goal planner for everyone. "These people are adults, but what we do is give them disclaimers, contracts of rules and regulations, about appropriate conference behavior since we want to encourage positive behavior," says Jeremy Harman, director of the 20th annual Conference On Student Government Associations at Texas A&M University. "It's a privilege to attend COSGA and a unique experience not to be taken for granted."

Remembering the Mission

Some conference participants seem to forget the whole purpose of why they're attending, which can tarnish their school's reputation with just a few irresponsible actions. "We were flying to a leadership conference in Chicago," says Stephanie Harris, president of the American Political Society at American University in Washington, D.C. "There were 30 of us from North Carolina, the D.C. area, and the Midwest. Everything was paid for, including the plane, food, and hotel. I saw a few students from another school give the guy picking us up \$20 to go buy alcohol and store it in the Holiday Inn van until they could get to the hotel to drink it all. Once at the hotel, those of age placed orders at the bar and had them billed to the room, paid by the conference. They could have paid for another person to go with the money they spent on alcohol."

Alex Arteaga, director of governmental relations for the California Higher Education Student Summit 2000, also remembers an alcohol-related experience at a conference. "Alcohol is a big problem, not so

much at CHESS but in others," Arteaga says. "At one conference, people were actually getting sick from consuming too much alcohol, so the paramedics had to come."

In any case, if students can't stay focused, group members should pitch in to keep each other in line. "We've had some problems in the past with our committee members drinking, and we've tried to squash that out," says Adam Sheedy, COSGA operations executive. "We remove them from the committee if they're found having private hotel parties with delegates and are drinking." Sheedy says it's up to committee members to set an example for delegates and to encourage COSGA's "established alternative night lifes" such as the movies, bowling, and coffeehouses.

Leading the Pack

Making a good impression can earn your group respect, but what can the team do to rise above the rest? Pitching in to help the conference organizers will make you stand out. "I remember that Rowan University in New Jersey was always very positive," says David Watson, COSGA promotions coordinator. "They had a strong influence especially when they did a workshop last year. They aren't a school that sits on the side. They're always out there networking."

Lending a helping hand also can boost your school's image. "I went to a conference last summer, and my group volunteered to help set up," says Aisha Jaleel, president of the Maryland Conservative Society at the University of Maryland at College Park. "We're going to do this again, and I hope to make this a future conference tradition for us."

A positive attitude not only makes you look good, it's contagious. Start by watching your own words, tone of voice, body language, and actions. "Penn State University and the University of Virginia always seem to carry a level of enthusiasm to learn and participate that really charges up a conference," says Dan Labert, national field director for the Leadership Institute in Virginia, which is co-sponsor of the national Conservative Leadership Conference. "Those two schools in particular possess a positive attitude, and it carries over to a positive performance. It's a lot like sports. If you come mentally prepared and are focused, it will spread to others who are participating."

Image Is Everything

How your members look and speak at a conference can have either a negative or positive impact, so think twice before pulling out those old jeans and using curse words or excessive slang. "My personal preference is to see people dress in business-formal attire," says Stephanie Ralhoff, chair of the California State Student Association at Chico. "Conferences are a dress rehearsal for what life will be like beyond college. More business attire provides more of a business atmosphere. To me, it's a time to dress to impress."

Some conferences call for casual wear for physical challenges or all-day events. "What is worn matters a lot. I'm not supporting cut-offs and sweats, but a nice pair of khaki pants and a polo shirt should be acceptable," says Carrie Jensen, conference manager for Magna Publications, which produces the National Conferences on Student Services. "Basically, students need to dress comfortably, because we want them to get involved and participate. They will be very active, and that's hard to do in suits and dresses."

Sometimes, a blend of styles might help groups reflect different images. School shirts can show the fun and creative side, while business attire can show the serious side, and casual outfits can show the day-to-day side of a school's group. "I think casual is more comfortable, but maybe conferences should have certain specified days for formal business wear and some for more comfortable clothes," says Jennifer Eckerle, student congress representative at Franklin College in Indiana. "A mix can be good sometimes. I am also pro school spirit and for wearing school sweatshirts or T-shirts to encourage a sense of pride."

Before you sport a power suit or a pair of Dockers, make sure to check with the conference planners to dress appropriately. "It's important for conference organizers to set expectations for dress," says Dr. Pat Bosco, founder of the annual National Leadership Conference on Student Governments. "Many years ago we never included any information about dress, and we got more questions about that than

anything else. We have casual dress recommendations now, because it breaks down formality and makes it easier for students to communicate with each other. It's right for our setting and our philosophy."

Time Well Spent

Make the most of your newly gained knowledge by bringing back information to help those who didn't get to go to the conference. "Since I've been here, we've basically just reported on it," says Elizabeth Randazzese, SGA president at Rowan University in New Jersey. "This year though, I'm going to make a motion at a meeting that everyone who attends conferences has to implement at least one idea or project they learned while there."

Also, instead of just lecturing, come up with some creative ways to share conference information such as through newsletters, e-mails, or visual packets. "I do lectures, but whenever I go to a conference, I make everyone who goes with me write a brief summary of their experiences," says Ivan T. Ortega, vice president of external affairs for Associated Students Incorporated at San Francisco State University in California. "Then, I break down the summary of all the pros and cons and elaborate on what's most relevant to our campus. The five people in my committee meet every Monday to discuss what's most important about the conferences and what we need to talk about most. I also include information in our newsletter, the *Student Involvement and Empowerment Center*, and in our school newspaper, the *Golden Gator*."

All's Well That Ends Well

Before jetting off for your next conference, stop and think. Does everyone in your group understand the goals and consequences for misbehavior? Did you find out about dress requirements? How will you bring back what you learn? Setting guidelines that everyone agrees with before you pack your bags will ensure that all delegates follow otherwise unspoken rules. You'll earn prestige for your group and school and secure a place at the top of conference invitation lists next year. Plus, conference-going is always more fun when members agree their biggest perk isn't parties, it's the privilege to represent the group and bring home fresh ideas.