

CREATING VENUES FOR STUDENT INTERACTIONS WITH THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Activities performed outside the classroom environment are in general embraced enthusiastically by students because they are a break in their class routines. In colleges, the importance of extracurricular activities is well established, the primary goal activities being focused at the level of the individual student, and in the broader sense at the college community level.¹ Although most of the learning process occurs in class, the campus environment is important in supplying students with chances to become engaged in activities that contribute to their growth as educated citizens. The notion of performing an action outside of the instructor's radar gives students the freedom to make their own decisions, communicate with others, and perhaps find hidden abilities.² At Hostos Community College students find ways to integrate themselves in the college's tapestry through club memberships, sororities, fraternities, and other organizations that fit their personal styles. Nevertheless, this type of engagement seems to revolve around an exclusive range of activities not leaving much room to interact with community members outside the students' inner groups.

Hostos Community College offers plenty of opportunities for community interactions. Weekly announcements are generated by the Office of Student Affairs through The Link.³ The array of activities is vast; it includes conferences, job fairs, food drives, plays, art exhibits, and many other events that take place on the campus. Yet, this generous amount of activities attracts mostly participants who are directly involved in the organization of the events. Other attendees are those that have been directly invited or encouraged by faculty in their classrooms.⁴ As a result, the energy and effort invested by the organizers is not proportionally rewarded by the community.

Creating a campus environment in which students benefit from extracurricular activities requires looking for strategies that facilitate and encourage student participation. My desire to improve student participation in activities organized by

the Natural Sciences department began three years ago, when I decided to develop two activities to nurture students' proactive involvement in those events. The aims of the activities were to integrate students in the institution's life by participating outside the classroom settings. In addition, the activities were intended to foster personal skills, such as communication and critical thinking by allowing interaction with other members of the college community. Lastly, the activities wished to foster social conscience to appreciate and value the work of other individuals.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

Two assignments were designed to offer students with opportunities to write about their interactions with other members of the college community. The assignments were prepared to fit two distinct student group categories. One assignment was offered to groups that participated in college events during their instructional hours: they attended either opening ceremonies or guest speaker conferences. This group was required to write a report on the main points presented in the conference. The second assignment was designed for student groups that participated outside their classroom hours by visiting exhibits and poster presentations; they were required to write a newsletter article on selected student work. Both assignments included detailed instructions, guide questions, and a sample to follow. To make the experience appealing, it was rewarded with extra points on their course work.

THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The Natural Sciences Department offers yearly college-wide events, the Earth Day Celebration and the National Teach-In in the spring semester and the Departmental Open House in the fall semester.⁵ During these events the department prepares a series of celebratory activities intended to display faculty and student work to the college community. Poster presentations and lab demonstrations are performed by students on the Bridge. Conferences given by outside speakers are usually conducted in the Faculty Dining Room (FDR). Oral presentations given by faculty and students' collaborative presentations, debates and contests to test knowledge are conducted in large classrooms and are open to the visitors. Movie and documentary shows are shown in classrooms, the FDR, and the library's multimedia room. The events last for a day or two, offering plenty of opportunities for students to participate and accumulate sufficient information to prepare their reports.

THE PRODUCTS OF STUDENT WORK

The majority of students opt to complete the assignment as an investment in extra points. Most of the comments are positive and show their appreciation for their peer's work and understanding of current global events. The following are some excerpts of students' reports: "I really enjoyed the Earth Day celebration. I was well pleased by seeing the different creative posters made by the students to make us aware of the problems surrounding our planet." "The ability of students to have the opportunity to participate and conduct research really struck me. As leaders they will be more aware of their environment and practice the precautions they will need to make a wonderful and safe environment." "One of the major

highlights was to see how many students care about presenting their knowledge to the public.” “On this day I believe everyone should take at least five minutes of their time to educate themselves about what is occurring around the world.” “I believe events like this should be held more often because it does really raise awareness in the reader. I was definitely surprised and amazed at the great deal of knowledge.” These responses show us that our activities have a positive effect in students’ views, and that our efforts directed to provide them with information outside classroom settings is worthy.

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of collecting students’ written pieces is a great tool to assess the impact of departmental efforts in educating the college community. Student reports provide us with evidence to improve activities in future planning and confirm to us that our efforts are appreciated and valued.

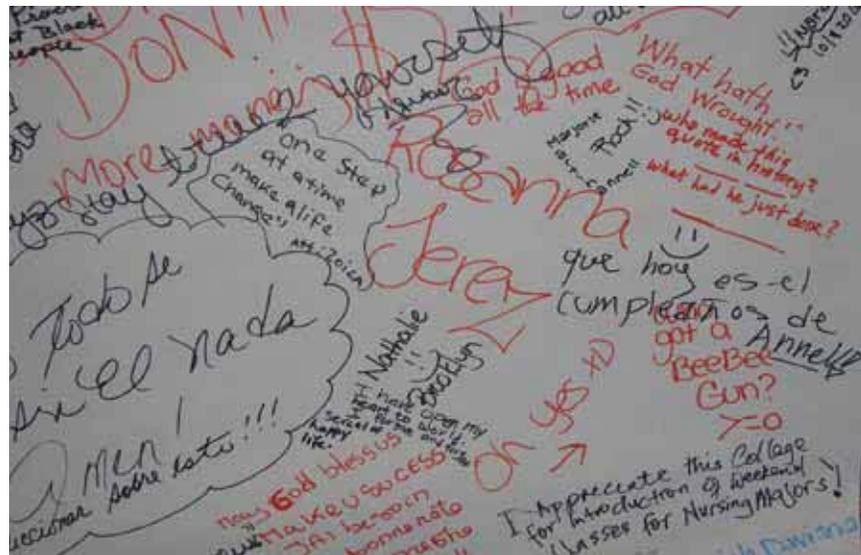
As faculty we can create venues to help students in connecting with extracurricular activities by advertising the events and encouraging their active integration in campus life. We can design activities with the community’s vision in mind.⁶ One option is for faculty to disseminate the multiple events that take place in college via Blackboard links, by calling students’ attention to bulletin board postings, by encouraging the use of college email addresses, and by giving assignments that encourage interaction with other students or faculty. In this way, we can create important connections with institutional life as well as commend the benefits of extracurricular activities on the professional development of our students. On the personal side, I have received positive encouragement from organizers of the events to whom I give bound copies of student responses as feedback information for future actions and my personal recognition to their work. I have benefited as an educator because I have had the chance to glimpse into my students’ perceptions of our efforts to enrich their professional development.

END NOTES

- 1 State University. com. College Extracurricular Activities - Impact on Students, Types of Extracurricular Activities. College Extracurricular Activities Impact on Students, Types of Extracurricular Activities (Retrieved April 23, 2010)
- 2 Colby, A. T. Ehrlich; E. Beaumont and J. Stephens. Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. A Wiley Imprint (2003)
- 3 The Link. A Newsletter from the Office of Student Activities. Hostos Community College. www.hostos.cuny.edu/sdem/student_activities_thelink.html (Retrieved December 14, 2009)
- 4 The audience for events sponsored by the Natural Sciences Department are usually classes that meet at the time the event is being conducted. On other occasions, faculty members who are involved in the organization invite their students to attend on a voluntary basis.

F. Henderson

- 5 The Natural Sciences Department sponsors three events open to the college community: the Earth Day Celebration since 1995, the Open House since the fall of 2007, and the National Teach-In since the spring of 2008. Two faculty members are elected to be the organizers while other departmental members contribute with classroom activities.
- 6 Lenz B. A Community of Learners: Building a Supportive Learning Environment. Edutopia, What work in Public Education. <http://www.edutopia.org/envision-schools-learning-community-respect> (Retrieved December 14, 2009)



Writing on the wall at Hostos Community College