

PROMOTING CAMPUS ACTIVITIES: ENCOURAGING STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Charles A. Lubbers, University of South Dakota
chuck.lubbers@usd.edu

Teddi A. Joyce, University of South Dakota
teddi.joyce@usd.edu

ABSTRACT

Like any business, colleges and universities must build relationships with new students and retain relationships with current students to enhance their chances for economic success. More recent studies continue to demonstrate that participation in campus activities encourages greater student retention rates as well as personal growth and satisfaction. Campus (experiential) events promote interaction between students and the university, helping to build longer-term bonds between the student and the college or university. Thus, campus events begin to develop relationships with the students and reinforce the brand through interaction and the qualities of the events themselves.

However, offering programs and events that help to cement this relationship only works if those students know about and attend the events. A survey of 516 students at a Great Plains, public university was conducted to find out about student attitudes toward the current program offerings, what they would like to see in the future, as well as suggestions for what prevents and encourages them to attend the events. Results of the survey suggest that student participation in campus activities was extremely low, a small percentage of students on the campus were likely to attend these events, and that these students were likely involved in other campus organizations. Differences were also found based on the students' year in school and whether they lived on campus or commuted. The major reasons that students identified for not attending, being motivated to attend and suggestions for preferred program types are also discussed.

Keywords: Promotion, Campus, Activities, Student, Participation

INTRODUCTION

Like any business, colleges and universities must build relationships with new students and retain relationships with current students to enhance their chances for economic success. American College Testing (ACT) data (2013) demonstrate that the national dropout rate from first-year to second-year is 34.2% representing the potential for significant loss of institutional revenue. There is a large body of research focusing on individual, institutional, and environmental factors that influence student retention.

Institutional commitment to retention plays a significant role in the student experience. In

his seminal work, Astin (1977) examined how institutional environmental factors translate into student satisfaction noting that purposeful student involvement increases student connections to the institution. Enhancing the student experience through academic programs, faculty interactions, financial assistance and student services and activities is considered an essential undertaking for both recruitment and retention.

More recent studies continue to demonstrate that participation in campus activities encourages greater student retention rates as well as personal growth and satisfaction. Extensive longitudinal literature highlights how active campus involvement benefits college student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The literature suggests that students who are involved in out-of-class activities are more satisfied with their experiences and relationships with each other as well as with the institution. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) proposed "what students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college" (p. 8). Thus, academic activities and social activities are significant opportunities for student involvement and critical factors in retention.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Babcock and Marks (2011) noted that during the past 50 years, the amount of time a typical college student spends studying or doing homework has declined, shifting the campus culture to place a greater emphasis on social life and activities. Tieu and Pancer (2009) determined that a successful adjustment to college was associated with participation in out-of-class activities that students assessed as being high quality—which was defined as activities that elicited positive feelings for the student and that provided the student with a sense of connection to others. Campus programming traditionally associated with learning and academics can create an important touch point of academic involvement, yet with more student time being spent on social life and activities, institutions need to provide a broad range of student-orientated activities to attract and retain students. Student activities or campus activities are frequently a collection of non-instructional events developed by student programmers to engage, entertain, and involve students outside of the classroom and increase satisfaction and enjoyment of the campus experience.

Campus Event Marketing and Promotion

Campus events, where students interact with each other and the college, can be called experiential events (Wood, 2009). These experiential events can be powerful as they can generate short-term impact but also build longer-term changes in attitude and belief (Sneath, Finney, & Close, 2005). Thus, for colleges and universities, events have the potential to secure or enhance their bonds with their students (target market). Participation in student activities impacts student retention and campus events offer a means to develop relationships with the students and reinforce the institutional brand through social interaction and the qualities of the events themselves.

Creating and securing the programs and events that provide worthwhile experiences will

work only if those students know about the events. Once considered standard promotional materials, campus posters and flyers are no longer sufficient means of effective event marketing, public relations and advertising. Instead, much of the current discussion about promotional activities is focused on using promotional tools and brand identity as a way to attract students to events and enhance their experiences at those events.

Effective promotional materials require more than sufficient program information and being error free. Consistency of promotional materials reflects the need for programming boards to be conscious of design elements, logos and copy every time an event is promoted, and that promotion should be coupled with the strategic, planned placement of promotional materials. Clear, consistent campus activities board promotional materials will strengthen event recognition and the activities programming board identity (Borgmann, 2013; Corces-Zimmerman, 2011; Hilson, 2013). As Campbell, Keller, Mick, & Hoyer (2003) note, “a crucial communication task for unknown brands is to build the knowledge in consumers’ minds necessary to become established” (p. 292). Once a student population is able to recognize specific promotional materials and tie them to consistent event experiences, brand expectations are developed. Thus, consistency of marketing materials, message and brand identity is critical to continued attendance (Arias & Micalone, 2013).

The advice of programming professionals guiding student programmers to build a strong brand image for the organization is not surprising. A strong brand image helps consumers develop positive attitudes and can enhance the brand value (Aaker, 1996). Strong branding will help intensify social and emotional value and brand student activity programming boards’ events (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2012).

Technology options are predominant on most campuses. While access to electronic flyers, blogs and websites, and the dominance of various social media communities is likely to change from campus to campus, repetitive messages that reach students where they actively seek information are important to successful event promotion (Corces-Zimmerman, 2011). Social media, often termed Web 2.0 applications, allow for direct engagement with consumers through creating, collaborating and sharing content (Thackeray, Neigler, Hanson, & McKenzie, et al., 2008). And, with the widespread use of social media on college campuses, there seems to be a clear directive that social media should not only be used, but also actively integrated into all promotional materials. Social media content, comprised of text, pictures, videos and networks, are easy to access and can reach large numbers (Berthon, Pitt, Planger, & Shapiro, et al., 2012). Fully integrating social media as a marketing and promotional opportunity goes beyond simply posting events on Facebook and Twitter. Social media moves interaction beyond traditional promotion. Its active nature allows organizations to seek a more long-term relationship and affords greater communication than the one-way nature of posters and flyers (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). The interactive nature of social media is a way to help students experience the events. For example, promotion via social media allows for the generation of short-term impact with the creation of contests and special prizes (Borgmann, 2013). Also, social media and viral videos can offer students a chance to experience aspects of the entertainment prior to the campus events with embedded links. Videos allow students to see and hear performers building anticipation and other social platforms can extend the dialogue after an event ends.

The final promotional strategy commonly recommended is collaborating or co-sponsoring events with other student groups. Collaboration can maximize exposure and create greater word-of-mouth promotion. A common theme suggested developing promotional teams that consist of influential students who can help spread the message or those who have interests relevant to the event. When members of different organizations were able to come together to cross-promote, those teams were frequently representative of different target audiences (Espino, 2008). Adding diverse student interests to a singular event can add a personal dimension to event communication. By bringing diverse groups together, the collaborative effort serves to enhance event visibility by reaching new target markets and to provide opportunities to build new social relationships and event affinity. As Papasolomou & Melanthiou (2012) note “people in groups share information because they trust one another” (p. 321). Collaborating or co-sponsoring activities relies on social networks that exist outside of Web 2.0 applications and can create awareness through personal relationship building.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The previous review of literature leads to several research questions that the current investigation was designed to answer.

- RQ 1 – Which students are attending events sponsored by the University’s activities program?
 - RQ 1a – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s living situation?
 - RQ 1b – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s year in school?
 - RQ 1c – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s membership in the University’s Greek system?
 - RQ 1d – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s membership in a university-recognized organization?
- RQ 2 – What events or programs would students like to see brought to campus?
- RQ 3 – What discourages students from attending events sponsored by the University Activities Board?
- RQ 4 – How can we promote the sponsored events to increase attendance?

METHOD

A self-administered, print survey questionnaire was used in the current investigation in an attempt to answer the research questions posed. In addition to demographic questions for classification purposes, one section attempted to determine if various information/communication sources may influence the decision to attend. Additionally, questions asked about their past participation in programs and events sponsored by the university’s program committee. Finally, closed- and open-ended questions were used to determine what encourages and discourages student attendance and how we might better promote these events.

Students in an undergraduate research class were tasked with the collection of survey responses. The students completed the university’s ethical treatment of human subjects training and received instructions and guidelines on survey administration. Survey administrators were

asked to seek a balance in respondent sex, academic class/year and to seek responses from multiple degree programs at the university. The sampling technique used a nonprobability, available sampling frame. A filter question in the survey assured that all the respondents were currently attending the university. The surveys were administered during the fall 2013 term.

Data were analyzed using SPSS-PC. In addition to basic descriptive statistics for frequency and measures of central tendency, crosstabulations were conducted to determine the relation between variables. Pearson chi square and Cramer's V were used to determine the level of significance for the observed frequency counts versus expected frequency counts in the crosstabulations.

RESULTS

Respondent Profile

Using the methods described above, a total of 516 students completed the survey, representing 5% of the total student enrollment of the university. In an attempt to generate a sample that would be as representative of the student body as possible, data collectors were asked to attempt to have their sample match the university numbers in terms of student sex and race/ethnicity. On both measures the data collectors did an excellent job of making the percentages very similar to the full university. In the survey sample, 62.5% of the respondents were female and the university student population is 61.4% female. Additionally, the racial/ethnic breakdown was very similar to that of the university. The university student population is 89% white, and the sample had 87.4% white respondents. Information related to the breakdown of the sample by academic rank/year will be discussed below.

Research Questions

The remainder of the results section will provide the results related to the research questions presented earlier.

RQ 1 – Which students are attending events sponsored by the University's activities program?

Of the 516 respondents to the survey, only 228 (44.1%) indicated that they had participated in at least one program, while 173 (33.5%) indicated that they knew about the activities but had never attended any programs. An additional 115 (22.3%) indicated that they did not know about the programs and, presumably, had not attended any. Of the 228 who had attended at least one program, the vast majority had attended only one (84, 36.8%), two (68, 29.8%) or three (39, 17.1%) programs. Clearly the level of participation in the students surveyed was extremely low.

In an attempt to determine if there are student characteristics that could be connected with past participation in programs, five sub-questions were proposed. Given the small number of students who had participated in four or more events, the variable was recoded so that all who had participated in four or more events would be placed in the same category. The results of the recoding would mean that the 401 students who answered these questions would be classified as

having attended 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4+ programs.

RQ 1a – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s living situation?

Of the 516 students surveyed, the vast majority lived either on campus (229, 44.4%) or off campus, but still within the city (263, 51%). The remaining students either commuted from outside the city (21, 4.1%) or had some other living arrangement (3, .6%). The small number of respondents who were commuting from outside the city required that those respondents be collapsed into a category with local commuters. Thus, on table 1 the two classifications are for those living on campus and those who live off campus.

Table 1. Housing Location by Number of Events Attended Crosstabulation

Housing Location		Number of Events Attended					Total
		0	1	2	3	4+	
On Campus	N	47	32	30	20	20	149
	Exp. N	64.0	31.1	25.5	14.6	13.9	
Off Campus	N	124	51	38	19	17	249
	Exp. N	107.0	51.9	42.5	24.4	23.1	
Total		171	83	68	39	37	398

Pearson Chi-Square = 16.124, 4 df, $p < .003$; Cramer's V = .201, Sig= .003

The chi square and Cramer’s V significance levels were .003, indicating that the differences between the observed and expected frequencies would have been extremely unlikely to have happened by chance. A comparison of the observed and expected frequency counts in the cells demonstrates a clear result – students who live on campus were significantly more likely to have attended events than those who live off campus. Additionally, many of the on campus students are freshman, who have the lowest level of participation because of their short time on campus. Thus, the strong level of attendance among the on campus students is particularly important. It is also important to note that some of the off campus students who reported participating in events, may have done so while they still lived on campus.

RQ 1b – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s year in school?

The year of study was compared between the sample and the university population. While the number of respondents at the four years of undergraduate study are similar to the overall university undergraduate population, graduate students represented a much smaller percentage of the sample (6.6%) as compared to the population at the university (20.2%). The percentage of freshmen in the sample is purposely smaller than their percentage in the university, since at the time of data collection they would have only been on campus for three months.

Table 2. Student Class by Number of Events Attended

Student Class		Number of Events Attended					Total
		0	1	2	3	4+	
Freshman	N	26	7	8	5	3	49
	Exp. N	21.2	10.1	8.4	4.8	4.6	
Sophomore	N	27	24	25	11	16	103
	Exp. N	44.5	21.2	17.6	10.1	9.6	
Junior	N	44	24	17	13	9	107
	Exp. N	46.2	22.0	18.3	10.5	9.9	
Senior	N	49	26	18	8	9	110
	Exp. N	47.5	22.7	18.8	10.8	10.2	
Graduate Student	N	26	1	0	2	0	29
	Exp. N	12.5	6.0	5.0	2.8	2.7	
Total		172	82	68	39	37	398

Pearson $\chi^2 = 46.376$, 16 df, $p < .000$; Cramer's $V = .171$, Sig = .000

The results of the crosstabulation of the year of study and the number of events attended are presented in table 2. The chi square and Cramer's V values were significant at the .000 level. By comparing the observed versus expected cell frequencies in each cell it is easy to see two trends in the data. First, graduate student participation is extremely low, with 26 of the 29 graduate students who responded to the item indicating that they had participated in no events. The second trend involves undergraduate attendance. Freshman had lower than expected event attendance, possibly because of the timing of the survey, while sophomores have a higher than expected rate of event attendance.

In an effort to ascertain whether participation in other aspects of campus life will lead to participation in university sponsored programs and events, additional analyses were conducted. The next two research questions compare being a member of the university Greek system or belonging to any recognized student group and the student's level of participation in university sponsored programs and events.

RQ 1c – Are there differences in student participation based on the student's membership in the University's Greek system?

Of the 514 students who answered the question, 164 (31.8%) reported being a member of the University's Greek life system. Table 3 presents the results of the crosstabulation of the number of events attended and Greek organization membership. Both the chi square and Cramer's V place the significance level for the crosstabulation at .000.

Table 3. Greek Life by Number of Events Attended

Greek Life?		Number of Events Attended					Total
		0	1	2	3	4+	
Yes	N	32	36	36	18	15	137
	Exp. N	59.3	28.8	23.3	13.4	12.3	
No	N	141	48	32	21	21	263
	Exp. N	113.7	55.2	44.7	25.6	23.7	
Total Count		400	84	68	39	36	400

Pearson $\chi^2=35.710$, 4df, $p < .000$; Cramer's $V=.299$, Sig=.000

Members of Greek organizations reported higher than expected attendance at university sponsored events, programs, etc. For example, the number of Greek members who reported having attended no university events was slightly more than one-half of what would have been expected, but for all four categories of event attendance their observed frequency was higher than what would have been expected. Conversely, those students who were not members of the Greek system were more likely to have attended no events, than what would have been expected. Thus, across the board the respondents who are members of the Greek system at the university were significantly more likely to attend events.

RQ 1d – Are there differences in student participation based on the student’s membership in a university-recognized organization?

In an attempt to determine if student involvement crosses over into other areas, students were asked to indicate if they were a member of any campus organization. The results were very even. Of the 513 who responded to the item, 258 (50.3%) indicated that they were members of a campus organization with the other 255 saying that they were not.

Table 4. Student Organization Membership by Number of Events Attended

Student Organization Member?		Number of Events Attended					Total
		0	1	2	3	4+	
Yes	N	77	44	47	23	27	218
	Exp. N	94.3	45.8	37.1	21.3	19.6	
No	N	96	40	21	16	9	182
	Exp. N	78.7	38.2	30.9	17.7	16.4	
Total		173	84	68	39	36	400

Pearson $\chi^2= 19.392$, 4 df, $p < .001$; Cramer's $V = .220$, Sig= .001

The statistically significant results on table 4 are similar to the results of table 3 related to the Greek system. Respondents who reported being a member of a student organization were more likely to have participated in a higher number of events. Students who reported that they were not

a member of a campus group reported lower levels of attendance at events than what would have been expected.

RQ 2 – What events or programs would students like to see brought to campus?

The most important step in encouraging student attendance is to offer programs with the strongest appeal. A review of current programs offered on the campus under study as well as peer institutions led to the creation of a list of 14 possible types of sponsored programs that are being offered. The respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (not likely) to 5 (very likely) how likely they would be to attend an event of this type. The mean scores for each of the 14 are presented on table 5. Five of the 14 items had a mean score above 3.0, the middle point on the scale. Concerts was clearly the most likely to be attended by the respondents, with an extremely high mean of 4.43. Comedians also had a very strong preference among the respondents, with a mean score of 3.85. The other categories with scores over 3.0 were magicians, dances, and movie nights.

Table 5. What type of programs would you like?

Program Type	Mean	Program Type	Mean
Concerts	4.43	Variety acts	2.92
Comedians	3.85	Game night	2.72
Magicians	3.12	Speakers	2.68
Dances	3.09	Art show or film	2.65
Movie night	3.06	Service	2.50
Outdoor activity	2.96	Do-it-yourself	2.45
Student talent	2.96	Diversity	2.39

The remaining nine categories had scores below the center point, with programs on diversity, do-it-yourself activities, or service projects garnering the lowest scores. However, it’s important to note that the means for the nine categories under 3.0 varied by less than .6.

The preferences expressed in table 5 were echoed in the respondents’ responses to an open ended question asking “What events or programs would you like to see CAB bring to campus?” The most popular response category, by far, included responses related to concerts, music in general, a genre of music or a specific artist. Of the 333 respondents who provided some answer to this question, 229 (68.8%) had answers that included references to concerts, music, etc. The second most popular answer to the open-ended question was a distant second with 40 (12%) respondents referring to comedians in general or a specific comedian. Other choices with multiple responses included “dances” (20, 6%); “movies” (16, 4.8%) and “magician” (14, 4.2%).

RQ 3 – What discourages students from attending events sponsored by the University Activities Board?

A review of the literature identified five common reasons students give for not attending programs and events. A five-point scale was used to measure the respondent’s answer about how

likely (5) to unlikely (1) each of these five factors would be in preventing them from attending sponsored programs and events. The results clearly indicate that distance ($M=3.97$), work schedules ($M=3.67$) and school work ($M=3.25$) would be likely barriers to attending, but ticket price ($M=1.85$) and having to care for children or find a sitter ($M=1.26$) would not be a likely reason for missing an event.

Table 6 – Open-Ended Response for Reasons to Not Attend

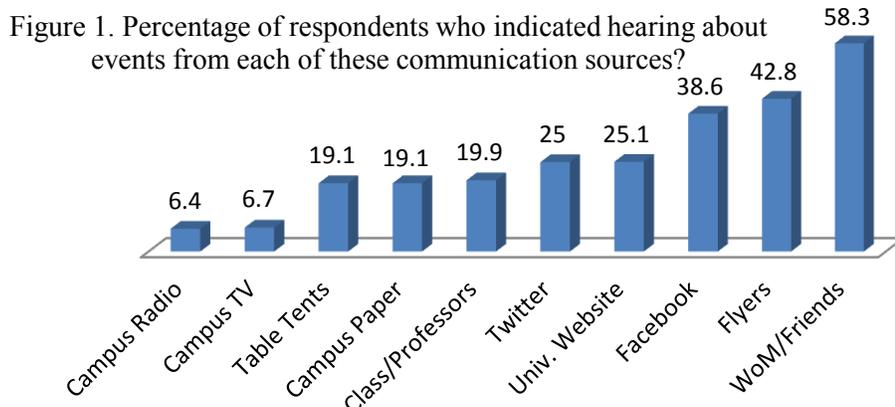
Category Title	N (%)
Homework/Classes/Tests	103 (18.8%)
No Time/Busy/Busy Schedule	101 (18.4%)
Lack of Information or Promotion/Didn't Know/Little Notice	98 (17.8)
Bad Events: e.g., Poor Performers, Not Fun, Boring, Bad Venues, Too few tickets, etc.	57 (10.4%)
Event Scheduling/Timing/Conflicts	50 (9.1%)
Not Interested	41 (7.5%)
Price/Money	34 (6.2%)
Work	30 (5.5%)
Poor Attendance-Friends Not Going	17 (3.1%)
Commuter/Distance	11 (2%)
Other	7 (1.3%)
Total	549

An additional open-ended question was included to uncover other possible variables that might prevent student participation. Some students offered no answers, while others offered multiple. As noted on table 6, a total of 549 answers were provided. Of that number, the vast majority had something to do with time or scheduling. The categories related to class work (18.8%), being too busy (18.4%), event scheduling (9.1%) and work (5.5%) together accounted for over 50% (51.8%) of the total responses. The other major categories for not attending events involved not being aware of them (17.8%), thinking that the events were poor (10.4) or just having no interest (7.5%). The cost of the event, who was attending the event, and the distance for commuters, would play a much smaller role in the decision to not attend. The small percentage of students who identified commuting or distance as a problem in table 8 seems to conflict with the results on table 7. However, since the events are generally all occurring on the campus and there were very few commuters from outside the community in the sample, most of the respondents probably did not perceive this as a problem in the current program offerings. However, distance could be an issue if programs were to be offered outside the city.

RQ 4 – How can we promote the sponsored events to increase attendance?

While time issues are the primary reason for not attending an event, as noted on table 8, many respondents indicated that they simply did not know about the events or they received the information too late. To determine how the respondents had heard about past campus events, they were asked to indicate if they ever recall receiving information on an event from 10 likely information sources.

As noted on figure 1, word of mouth, or friends, was the clear leader in communicating event information, followed by flyers and Facebook postings. Flyers were the only traditional communication source that appears to be effective with the respondents in this study. Other traditional advertising/promotion communications vehicles (radio, television, table tents and newspaper) were found at the bottom of the effectiveness list. Computer mediated communications (CMC) (Twitter, website, and Facebook) were all in the top half of communication sources.



DISCUSSION

Many colleges and universities are seeing an increasing number of students seeking educational opportunities, yet the national retention rate is 65.8% (ACT, 2013). The body of literature on factors impacting student retention notes that student involvement in campus activities is one of the critical elements. From a business perspective, retention pays—for students in terms of future employment and for institutions in terms of revenue. The purpose of this investigation is to determine student preferences for both campus activities and the ways in which student activities programming boards can communicate event information.

Babcock and Marks (2011) found students are spending more time on their social life and activities outside the classroom. However, the current research found that, approximately one-third of the students surveyed knew about these social programs yet never attended, and 22.3% indicated that they were not aware of any University activity programming board options. Students are doing something with their time, but it may not be with campus activities designed to enhance involvement and thus retention. The student programming literature seems to align with brand and consumer behavior literature by suggesting that to increase student interest and attendance, University activities boards should look not only at what is being offered for entertainment but also incorporate creative marketing strategies to develop brand familiarity (awareness) and enhance social media to reach students in a competitive environment. A lack of knowledge and limited participation are lost opportunities for connecting with other students in out-of-class activities.

Even the most appealing program may not have the attendance desired, and also be a missed opportunity to make and reinforce organizational, institutional, and social connections. Program preferences in table 6 demonstrated students had the most interest in concerts and comedians. However, no matter the event, the statistical results in figure 1 indicate that word-of-mouth, or friends, and flyers/posters are the primary way students learned about student activity programming board events. Social networks continue to be an essential aspect of a strong promotional strategy. These results are closely aligned with those of Lubbers and Joyce (2013) who found that the top information sources preferred by undergraduates for information on University sporting events were the University website, social media, flyers, and word of mouth. The importance of word of mouth and computer mediated communications found in the current investigation is consistent with the research of Fall and Lubbers (2010).

The statistical results indicate that only 44.1% of the students surveyed had participated in at least one activities board event. Also, the students most likely to participate in any activities board event are members of the University's Greek life community (table 3), and/or a member in some student organization (table 4). These results seem to speak to the need of collaboration as a means of promoting and generating greater interest that may contribute to the likelihood of attending events.

According to the 2012 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) first-year students who frequently interacted with peers, faculty, and campus units using social media were more engaged. Figure 1 notes that the respondents value social media as a source for information about campus events. Technology and Web 2.0 applications are an important way to directly reach and engage students. For example, Thackeray et al. (2008) note that customers who are active participants are more likely to talk to their friends about it. Social media's active nature and multiple channels facilitate interaction between individuals and organizations (Berthon et al., 2012). The creative use of these applications then becomes crucial for organizations to develop two-way brand relationships utilizing new media channels (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012).

This study investigated student preferences for campus activities and the ways in which student activities programming boards can communicate event information. Future research might include examining how University activities boards can build brand identity, how social activities contribute to brand identity and students' perception of institutional affiliation.

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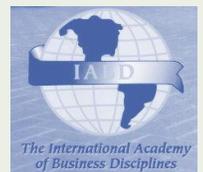
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