Planning a Successful Event

Begin by deciding on *either* a goal/mission for an event *or* a topic or presenter and then the goal or mission. Possible goals: social, making connections; intellectual stimulation; celebrating/honoring/recognizing an individual or group; updating alums about life on campus; fundraising for group’s operations, scholarships, or special project; community service; connecting Smith with your local community; current/new students gathering.

Determine steps to accomplish the goal or mission. Possible steps: use an interactive ‘game’ to stimulate mixing, finding out about who’s in the room; use nametags, adding information appropriate to the event; select a knowledgeable speaker from Smith alumnae, campus, or local community; create support materials if appropriate; include time for social interaction; include time for discussion and Q&A; use a feedback form at end of event; advertise Smith sponsorship of your program (lecture, film, etc.) to the public, if appropriate to your goal.

Share the planning with your team. Ask for volunteers for all tasks – share the responsibility and use the opportunity to involve others; make expectations clear and offer support along the way. Acknowledge team members to everyone at the event. Thank each volunteer personally after the event. Get feedback from volunteers on their role and the event in general.

Intend for an event to appeal to a diverse group, and create your invitation to appeal to the greatest diversity of alumnae.

Invitations: Consider the various ways of inviting attendees: Email, Facebook, mailed. What’s worked best in the past? Create a timeline for the invitation and reminder(s). Decide whether you want RSVPs emailed, phoned or mailed. RSVPs with payment in advance result in fewer no-shows. If the RSVP is to be returned by mail (with payment, if charging), decide if you want to include an invitation for contributions to other programs, such as club’s Book Awards, scholarship, or general operations. Those who can’t attend are often willing to make a contribution. Decide whether you want to invite parents of current students, current students if they’re home on vacation, or prospective students.

Timeline each task that needs to be done before the event, e.g., scheduling speaker(s) and location; sending invitations and reminders; receiving RSVP’s; preparing materials and supplies; making or purchasing refreshments.

Know your audience and be inclusive of diversity in all elements of planning: time, location, food (allergies, dietary restrictions), accommodations for age/disabilities, presenter’s awareness of diversity, ability to include issues of diversity in discussions and materials as appropriate.
Use Smith alums as speakers/presenters as often as possible. Consider combinations of Smith alum/faculty member/local “expert” on a selected topic for presentations. Using local expertise is a chance to bring Smith into your community as well connecting a local “expert” with Smith and alums.

Intend the event to be as interactive as possible. Make use of the expertise that might be in the room.

Budget realistically for the event, given your group’s financial resources. (If you need to charge for an event, use a sliding scale for young alums; use “suggested donation” so no one feels unable to attend.) Determine whether your goal is to cover expenses or make money. Invite alums to contribute by bringing refreshments, if appropriate.

Be prepared to share current campus news and information about other events planned for your group.

Be prepared to talk about the importance of giving to The Smith Fund on an annual basis – make it personal and relevant to the topic or content of the event, if possible.

Shortly after events, send personal thank-you notes to presenter and host, as well as all volunteers.

Please email any additions to Sarah Mills at scmills45@gmail.com
How to Plan a Successful Club Event

1. **Pre-Planning**
   a. Develop a calendar for the year citing conflict dates (school vacations, local college graduations, Smith alumnae events/graduation, other area events) and then pick dates for your events:
      i. Fall – College speakers (great availability/fewer conflicts in the fall)
      ii. Winter - Tea
      iii. Spring – Annual meeting/alumnae speakers
   b. Pick a theme for the year (e.g. the arts; going green; entrepreneurship, etc.) that is broad enough to create interest/relevance for alums of all ages.
   c. Develop committees/assign tasks/responsibilities to club members. (Best Practice: have Co-chairs of committees break tasks down, and assign out as many as possible. Have a few people who are “Swiss army knives”—willing to jump in and help out wherever needed.
   d. Secure a location—alumnae home or other meeting space; keep a list of alums willing to host events. Ensure each location has adequate parking.
   e. Will an RSVP be required? If so, assign one person with email/phone contact information for invitation.

2. **Expenses**
   a. Determine what your expenses/budget are for the event and if you will need to charge a fee. If you charge a fee, will you discount for club members vs. other alums? Also discounted/free for recent alums?

3. **Communications**
   a. Get news of your event out early and often.
      i. Send out email invitations using the college system or have the college send for you.
         1. Send first invitation at least one month prior to the event.
         2. Send a reminder two weeks prior to the event.
         3. Send final reminder a few days prior to the event.
      ii. Paper invitations?
         1. Alums with no email address
         2. Depending upon the event
      iii. Include in newsletter to area alums.
      iv. Promote event at other gatherings of Smith alums.
4. The Event
   a. Confirming the speaker – a week or so prior to the event:
      i. Ensure the speaker is all set with the topic, travel arrangements, location, parking, etc.
      ii. Agree on a format; encourage an interactive format that allows alums to participate.
      iii. Share information about the audience and any particular concerns.
   b. Confirming the location – a week or so prior to the event:
      i. Ensure location/host is all set and confirm an early arrival for set up time if needed.
      ii. Request parking consideration if needed.
      iii. If an outdoor event, confirm rain location and related considerations.
   c. Send out final event reminder invitations.
      i. Two weeks prior to the event and the week of the event
   d. Refreshments
      i. If funded from the Club Account, confirm who is bringing the food/drink. Be sure to provide a budget ($ and #).
      ii. If pot-luck, create a matrix and encourage items needed in last two email reminders.
   e. Confirm Moderator
      i. If you have asked a club member to facilitate the evening’s events, be sure she is all set with the bio(s), questions, timeframe, etc. Be sure to have a back-up person assigned as facilitator (just in case).
      ii. Have a separate time-keeper who can signal the moderator.
   f. Miscellaneous
      i. Confirm who is bringing nametags/Sharpies.
      ii. Confirm who is checking attendance (especially if an RSVP’d or pre-paid event); if event is free, confirm who is to capture # of attendees, class year, names, etc.
      iii. Identify a team responsible for set up (arriving early) and a team for clean-up (staying late).
      iv. Confirm who needs/is providing rides to the event.

5. Post Event
   a. Confirm who is sending thank you notes to host, speakers, and moderator.
   b. Ensure any follow-up with presenters or audience is completed in a timely manner.

Please email any additions to Debra Chromy at debra@chromy.org
Volunteer Leadership Conference  
September 11-13, 2014  
How to Plan a Successful Event session

Presenters:  
Debra Chromy ’84  President, Smith College Club of Cambridge, MA  
Sarah Cross Mills ’66  President, Smith College Club of Maine

In addition to Sarah and Debra’s points, alumnae in break-out groups noted many Best Practices they employ at their own events.

Best Practices:

- Traditional Annual event provides a good platform.
- Book Groups are popular among many clubs.
- Send Save the Date/Set the Date information out as soon as possible.
- Hold age focused events/gatherings, however every event and gathering should be open for all to attend.
- Plan networking events for young alumnae.
- One way to gauge success is by seeing new faces as well as familiar faces, diversity in years and involvement.
- Membership can help you track and know alumnae in your area.
- Variety and new ideas—You never know until you try!
- Fundraisers for Club gift to scholarship fund.

Best Practices for Reunion and Mini-Reunions:

- Hold mini Reunions in metro areas.
- Bring a friend!
- Gather with adjacent classes/plan cluster mini-reunions.
- Geographically based gatherings.
- Gather for milestone Birthday Party Celebrations e.g.; 40th, 50th, 60th.
- Create a Facebook page, and include throwback pictures and Reunion pictures.
- Give your Reunion a theme.
- Gifts/swag that are nice reminders of Smith College and your class.
- Plan entertainment such as featuring a notable alumna as speaker.
- Movie trailer . . . What’s to come.
- Create a fund raising element for gift to Smith.

For more on Best Practices, visit the Office of Alumnae Relations website at http://alumnae.smith.edu/clubs/clubs-groups/tools-for-leaders/best-practices/.