No Surrender. Let’s Retreat!

Helping Your Student Government Plan a Successful Retreat

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“We’ll cover that at the retreat.”
“We went over that at the retreat.”
“Let’s begin planning for next year’s retreat.”

Organization members all over North America can be heard making comments such as these. Have you ever stopped to ask, “What exactly is a retreat,” or “What is the purpose of our retreat?” Organizations that have asked these questions probably enjoy more successful retreats. In some organizations, retreats are simply a time to get away and camp. And while on retreat, this is exactly what happens—members simply camp and nothing much or little is discussed or achieved.

What Is a Retreat?

Lawson, et al., define retreats as a place away from it all. In other words, it is a place away from telephones, noise and distractions. This becomes more important for certain student organizations such as student government. Often, student government members are popular on campus and many make demands of them.

Lawson further describes retreats as taking place among a group of people with a common cause. It is a change of pace from regulation and routine so participants can relax and recreate. Virtually any group could have a retreat. Whether it is student government as a whole or just a committee within student government, retreats exist when groups such as these with a common cause decide to pursue a change from other routine meetings.

Retreats are generally a freeing experience with a purpose. They are meant to provide a time to reflect, to plan, to learn and to grow (Lawson, p. 33). Retreats can be very successful in helping push a group toward its goal as a result. For example, I know of one student government group that held a retreat to discuss its constitutional rewrite and organizational restructuring. This was successful in large part because it did not occur in the classroom building where the group typically met.

“There is something about taking time away in an atmosphere that stimulates people to listen, rest, talk, and refresh,” said Jumonville (p. 2). This is especially true when it transpires at an overnight retreat. Many student organizations conduct overnight events. In nearly each case, the overnight experience allows for a transformation to happen within the group. The group bonds strongly and can talk about the most sensitive subjects with much greater ease.

Many groups have found success by referring to their retreat as a leadership development workshop or conference and retreat. This helps in justifying the event and finding support to cover expenses. Ask yourself, “Which would help me get additional funding for my organization?” You might go about saying the following: “Please support our leadership development conference and retreat,” or “Please fund our retreat.” In the end, it may be the same event, but calling it something a bit different may help secure greater support.
What Is the Purpose of a Retreat?

Determining the purpose of your retreat is the first step in planning it. If you can decide what you want to accomplish, you will remain focused throughout the planning process. This will help you justify what you are doing and will create a basis for assessment when you are finished. For example, if the purpose of your retreat is to help members understand the organization committee structure, you can ask participants if the retreat helped them understand the committee structure. If they answer, yes, you have achieved your purpose. If they answer, no, you may need to do some additional work on that area of your organization when you return to campus.

Lawson indicates that retreats are planned around a goal or purpose. Some examples of retreat purposes include:

1.) To develop an effective team of newly elected officers and other key leaders.
2.) To bring an organization together as a group.

According to Brock, retreats can be held to introduce new members. This can be a very good way to bring the group together after an election.

Perhaps your organization wants to set some goals for the upcoming semester. This is also a reason to engage in a retreat.

In addition, retreats can provide information or be used to offer workshop sessions. For example, a group that holds an annual retreat can schedule breakout sessions as part of the event. This allows the membership to select what they need most. Because your organization is a group containing individual members, there are potentially different needs to be served. A retreat allows you to meet the needs of members with diverse backgrounds and needs.

Brock also states that retreats can be used to increase morale, to build a team and to motivate members of a group for the new year or semester. How many times have you attended a retreat to return and find yourself and the group excited about things and ready to work? Because retreats are transformational when conducted correctly, people can return as changed individuals. They often emerge with a different outlook on life.
Retreats can also be held to evaluate the progress of long-term goals and objectives. At the end of the year or even mid-year, you can hold a retreat to review an organization's goals. If student government wanted to increase voter turnout, the best time to discuss it after the elections is at a retreat. Because of the retreat's neutral location, the election can be discussed without anyone feeling attacked or threatened. This also makes retreats a good time to resolve group conflicts.

Furthermore, retreats help students and participants get to know one another better. In planning retreats, it is also important to remember that fun is part of the purpose, too!

When Should a Retreat Be Held?

Retreats can be conducted at several different times during the year. The best time will depend on your purpose. For this reason alone, developing a purpose is the first and most important step in planning a retreat. It dictates everything else. For example, if the purpose of a retreat is for group members to get to know each other and you are planning it for April when half the group graduates, this may not be the best time for the event.

The beginning of the year or semester is probably the most popular time to hold retreats. Of course, such timing can be quite effective, but groups should be encouraged to hold their initial retreat earlier in the summer if they are planning to set goals. If they wait until the beginning of the semester, they may already have missed valuable time and may not complete as many tasks as they might like.

If a group is evaluating its progress to date, a mid-year or January retreat can be very helpful. This allows the group to determine if established goals are no longer important and therefore need to be crossed off the list, or if they are still important and energy needs to be redirected to accomplishing them.

Groups may opt to hold a retreat prior to an anticipated conflict. All groups will have conflict. Student government groups are especially prone to it because of differing views held by members. If a new initiative about to be introduced may potentially create a big conflict, it may be better to introduce the initiative at a retreat. Again, because there is some neutrality in location, members may more richly discuss the matter at hand. For this reason, according to Brock, retreats can also be held before a major program. Imagine the success of your elections if the group meets prior to the beginning of the elections and fully discusses them.

Who Should Attend a Retreat?

Brock also answers this question. Putting it simply, anyone can attend a retreat. Again, using the purpose as a guide, you can effectively determine who should attend a retreat. Members will, of course, participate in the retreat, but there are others, such as officers who may also come as participants or to facilitate a session. For example, the treasurer may review the budget and financial process for the organization. People who groups sometimes forget to include are advisors, workshop presenters, or other resource persons. Workshop presenters may be participants or they may be special guests invited to lead a discussion.

For example, you might invite the scheduling office on your campus to conduct a session on reservations. Doing this will let that office know you teach the necessary information to your membership and will help your organization stay up to date on any new information the scheduling office needs to share. In the end, your relationship with the scheduling office will become stronger. If you are discussing the recruitment of members, you may have someone from the Army recruiting office assist you. Invite that individual to your retreat as a resource person.

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Who Should Facilitate a Retreat?

We have already alluded to some individuals who can facilitate a retreat for your organization. If organizational members present or facilitate, ensure that they are qualified and feel comfortable leading the discussion. Involve your organizational advisor and co-present the information if a person is not fully comfortable. Advisors are excellent sources of information and may also be excellent facilitators on a wide variety of topics. Invite the advisor of another organization to facilitate a session, as well. This gives your advisor a break and can strengthen relations between that group and yours.

Another great source of information on a college campus is the faculty. Many faculty members would be happy to assist your group by leading a session. This is particularly true if the topic is in the faculty member's major area of study. For example, if you are going to talk about marketing your organization, a marketing professor is a great resource. Groups such as student government that need to appeal to all of the student body can find this especially helpful.

Don't forget there are probably several other student affairs staff members who can assist you, as well (Brock). Just because the director of the University Center does not work with student government on a daily basis does not mean they have no information to share that pertains to student government. In fact, perhaps they were a former student government president and could assist you in all sorts of ways.

You should also remember to draw on members of the community. This is another way to create a great collaboration. For example, you might get a bank president to assist your group by leading a session. This is particularly true if the topic is in the faculty member's major area of study. For example, if you are going to talk about marketing your organization, a marketing professor is a great resource. Groups such as student government that need to appeal to all of the student body can find this especially helpful.

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You should also remember to draw on members of the community. This is another way to create a great collaboration. For example, you might get a bank president to discuss member retention. If you think there is no connection, think again. Bank presidents are very much in tune with what keeps customers coming back. Again, this is a wonderful way to begin dialogue and open communication.
Where Should A Retreat Be Held?

Much of where you hold a retreat is driven by budget. Organizations with smaller budgets must be more creative and may actually have more success as a result. Of course, the location of the retreat should always relate to its purpose. Places to consider when on a tight budget include:

- A member’s house
- The advisor’s house or apartment
- Your university center or other locations on campus that may be free
- Church spaces that may be rented for a nominal cost

Organizations with more financial resources may wish to consider a conference center or retreat center. A nice hotel can also provide an excellent location for a retreat.

In this regard, it is important to think outside of the box. For example, I know of one student group that held its retreat in a meeting room at a bowling alley. They ended the day by bowling. Another group held their retreat at a hotel near a theme park. They were able to get free tickets to the theme park and after meeting during the day, went to the theme park in the evening. As part of the purpose of the retreat, the group wanted everyone to get to know one another. At the theme park, they used time standing in lines and riding rides to achieve this purpose.

Retreats can also be held to evaluate the progress of long-term goals and objectives. At the end of the year or even mid-year, you can hold a retreat to review an organization’s goals.

What Should Go into Creating a Retreat Budget?

There are several things to consider when creating your retreat budget. Most costs for a retreat are tied up in lodging and meals. Groups should remember to include all meals that will be required for the retreat, as well as those occurring during any travel time to and from the event. It may be important to schedule the retreat so it ends earlier or starts later to save costs on meals.

Again, it becomes important to be creative. Breakfast costs can be eliminated if the event is at a hotel that serves a continental breakfast. When planning meals, be sure to take into account any special dietary needs. There may be fees associated with the rental of space, but if meals are being provided by the location, these fees are generally waived.

It is also important to remember incidental expenses such as snacks offered throughout the retreat. This will help people keep their energy up and stay focused. After three hours of talking about the by-laws, group members can become irritable. Small snacks will help alleviate these feelings.

The most important component of a retreat is probably the least expensive. Members should be provided (or be encouraged to bring) notebooks with all pertinent handouts, pens and notepaper.

Any other materials needed for workshops are also important to include. For example, anyone who has ever attended a communication exercise with peanut butter and jelly will know to account for peanut butter, jelly, bread and napkins in the budget.

What Should Be on the Retreat Agenda?

While at the retreat, it is important to set a tone for what should be expected. Icebreakers are a great way to begin. It should be noted that while retreats are meant to be fun and relaxed in tone, they are also designed for serious, open-minded, honest and cooperative communication. A good set of ground rules should be established at the beginning. Ground rules you may wish to consider are:

- Not interrupting one another
- Agreeing that no idea is a bad idea
- Allowing the group to break every 75 minutes regardless of where the conversation is so everyone can recharge.

It is important to begin by explaining the purpose of the retreat, its benefits, and to fully review the agenda (Brock). This will allow participants to know why they are meeting in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere. It will also demonstrate how each activity helps achieve the group’s goals and answer for each member what’s in it for them.

Retreat planners should arrange for someone to facilitate all aspects of the retreat schedule. Activities that actively involve each member will help everyone feel they are contributing to the retreat process.

Plan breaks during the day and vary the methods of presentation. If you spend two hours reviewing the constitution, allow the next activity to be more interactive, such as a meal or a goal-setting session. If you are very creative, you can create a Jeopardy board and ask Jeopardy-style questions to review the constitution. Topics could include The Executive Branch, The Judicial Branch or Powers of the Officers. This will help members stay focused on the topic at hand.

Be sure to take advantage of any visual aids. PowerPoint presentations or videos can help everyone stay engaged throughout the event.

Remember that everything on your agenda should relate to the retreat’s purpose. For example, if you have a session on setting goals and goal setting is not the purpose of your retreat, you may be wasting time. If, however, setting goals is a purpose of the retreat, this is an excellent activity.
What Should You Do after the Retreat?

Once your retreat has ended, it is important to clean up everything. Leave the site nicer than you found it. This will help maintain your organization’s reputation and may help with negotiating prices in the future. Some sites will reduce costs or eliminate deposits if they have a good working relationship with your group.

A good practice that is often overlooked is sending thank-you notes. In today’s world, many are tempted to send a thank-you via e-mail. However, a hand-written note will be more meaningful. Organizations such as student government may even wish to put a thank-you letter on their letterhead.

Finally, there is evaluation and assessment. Have everyone who attends complete a survey on what was good about the retreat and what should change in the future. This will enable future officers to plan effectively. This practice also is very rewarding. It lets those who planned the event know how well they did.

The assessment of the event in relation to how well it met its objectives or what people learned will help justify the expense of the retreat, especially to university administrators or fee committees that may approve your budget. Three questions you should always be sure to include are:

1. What was your favorite part of the retreat?
2. What would you do differently if you were planning the retreat?
3. What is one thing you learned during this retreat?

What Makes Great Retreats?

The best retreats are those where people continue to engage in dialogue after the retreat has concluded. The next time you are attending a retreat and are sitting around the campfire, ask yourself how this relates to the purpose of the retreat. If you can answer this question, your retreat planners have done an outstanding job. If you can’t, perhaps you should help plan the next retreat using the ideas we’ve discussed here.

As you attack planning a great retreat, remember: “No Surrender, Let’s Retreat.”

References


About the Author

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