

# Family Friendly Programming by Del Suggs

Perhaps the fastest growing demographic group of college students are the so-called “non-traditional” students. Think of traditional students as young (18-22 years old), unmarried and childless, the stereotypical college kids as defined in such classic Hollywood films as “Animal House.”

Non-traditional students are therefore everyone else. That means older students, who perhaps delayed college to work; and, returning students, who may be coming back to change careers. Because they are older, they may also have other accouterments of a more mature person-- such as a spouse, young children, a full-time or part-time job, and other responsibilities. They may be caring for aging parents, or they may be grandparents themselves returning to college just for intellectual enlightenment and the joy of learning.

As non-traditional students become a major population on college campuses, programming boards are facing a new paradigm in activities. Family Friendly programs may provide one solution to meeting the needs of these students.

## Often Neglected

Family friendly programs are often neglected on campus. It is easy to understand why they are overlooked. Non-traditional students are frequently under-represented in student government, and on the campus activities board or council. These students often have less free time to devote to volunteer and service positions because of their other responsibilities. It can be a challenge for a typical program board composed of 20 year-old students to consider the needs of non-traditional students, particularly without the involvement and guidance of someone outside of their own peer group.

The general exception to this is on the community college and vocational-technical college campus, where the entire SGA or CAB may be composed of these non-traditional students. These schools are often at

the vanguard of family friendly programs and events.

## Defining Family Friendly Programs

In developing family friendly programs, consider the following factors:

First, family friendly programs should appeal to non-traditional students. That often means older students, with interests other than video gaming, MTV, skateboarding, body piercing, and other aspects of youth culture.

Second, they should be enjoyable for students’ spouses, partners, or significant others to attend, too. Family friendly programs aren’t *just* for students.

Third, they should be “kid-friendly.” That means the event should at least be “G-rated” or “PG-rated” (on the motion picture scale) whether the program is a children’s event or not.

Fourth, they should be inexpensive to attend. For a program to be truly family friendly, the entire family group should be able to attend cheaply. Admission fees can add up quickly when multiplied by additional family members.

Fifth, the most successful family friendly programs are all-inclusive. If a meal can be included, along with (or part of ) the event, then it’s perfect.

Finally, sometimes family friendly shows can appeal to traditional college students and *their* parents. It’s not always for non-traditional students. Sometimes it’s for traditional students and their parents and siblings, such as a “Family Weekend,” “Parents’ Weekend” or “Little Sibs Weekend.”

## Picking a Time

In planning these family friendly programs, consider when “families” might be available to attend. Certain days will be apparent, such as weekends and holidays. Other days and times will be obviously poor choices, such as midday events during the school or work week.

But don’t just assume that family friendly events can only happen on Saturday morning. Consider children’s programs on those free days off from school (Teacher Planning Days, et al) that often fall on Friday or Monday.

Some of the most obvious opportunities for family friendly programs revolve around social and cultural holidays. Whether it’s a Thanksgiving celebration, Independence Day, President’s Day, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, these days provide both a theme and a reason for an event.

It goes without saying that you should be aware of cultural sensitivities. While pictures with Santa Claus or an Easter Egg Hunt may be innocent fun, make sure you aren’t offending groups within your community. For example, some schools enjoy Halloween-inspired events, while other schools might avoid those programs because of some perceived “satanic” connection. Just be aware of your local standards, and if you chose to exceed them be prepared to explain, educate, and defend your actions.

## Event Selection

There are plenty of program choices in the marketplace. Events and attractions can be touring professionals, they can be local artists, or they can be student-created. The ideas are abundant, and they include music, performing arts, novelty, and more.

Here are a few examples:

Everything But The Mime’s “Shana Banana” presents a Saturday morning program at many colleges. The non-traditional students bring their families to campus for a box breakfast and Shana’s music show for kids.

But music programs don’t have to be children’s shows to work for families. I’ve performed numerous family shows for Parents and Family Weekends because my music has a broad, multi-generational appeal. You’ll find

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that cutting-edge alternative bands, rap, metal, and some other musical styles which appeal to college students might not be as appealing to their parents. Consider the intended audience. If you're hosting a family weekend barbecue, you will be better served featuring entertainment which doesn't dominate the event.

Likewise, Robin Greenstein does a number of family concerts around the holidays. "I have had success with my multi-cultural December show "Songs of the Season," she says.

"Travelin' Max" is also a popular musical act for family weekend events. According to Everything But The Mime's Bill Fry, Max drew a crowd of over 3000 students, families, and locals at the University of Tennessee/Martin this year.

Ken Abrahams of FUN Enterprises features a number of very popular family programs, including sand art and other novelty items such as personalized mouse pads and photo keychains for Family Weekends. But his most innovative ideas are used at Orientation and Welcome Back events. "We make a photo keychain of parent's dropping off their kids for Orientation. That alone would be a great souvenir, but we imprint emergency phone numbers on the back for the parents," says Abrahams. Parents always have contact information for the Residence Assistants and the Dean of Students at their fingers.

### **Festivals, Fairs, Carnivals and More**

Combination events are nearly always family friendly, because there is something for everyone. Fairs, Festivals, Carnivals and similar programs fall into this category.

I've performed at several family events which featured multiple shows occurring simultaneously. At Kennesaw State University (GA), I performed a coffeehouse show for parents while their children were in another room watching a video. The program board

included a cheap spaghetti dinner, and everybody had a good time.

Macon State College had me perform for their "Campus Open House." Non-traditional students brought their spouses and children to see the campus, and then enjoyed to my music during dinner. You could hear parents explaining to their children "this is where Mommy goes when she drops you off at pre-school." I'll bet it served as a great recruitment tool for all those children who want to grow up to be just like Mommy and Daddy!

Shannon Huffman of Tennessee Wesleyan College says " We do have two activities that are not just family friendly- but community friendly. The Student Activities Office annually hosts a Fall Fest that offers Trick or Treating to the community in the Residence Halls, a haunted house, and student booths outside on the plaza. The student booths offer a variety of events from concessions to face painting to dunk the dean, etc. The booths are run by the student organizations and it is a great fund raiser for them. Spring Fest is much the same- but only open to YHC students, faculty and staff and their families. It is held during the day and offers a free picnic, bands, student booths, inflatables, tie-dye shirts, make your own cups, wax hands, etc. Just a huge variety of things to do for almost free!"

Similarly, the Savannah College of Art and Design (GA) features a children's booth at their famous "Sidewalk Arts Festival" held each April. Linette Chalifoux, a student at SCAD, says "the Student Activities Council runs a children's booth, and every year the school makes the booth larger because of it's success. We have tables set with face painting, flower crowns, stain glass making, make your own pin, jewelry making, mask making, sand art, and more. I can not express the look on a child's face when he or she leaves the festival with something they made with their parents."

Other "do it yourself" events can include a Vintage or Hot Rod Car Show, a Motorcycle Show, even a film

festival. A "cartoon film festival" featuring such well-know stars as Bugs Bunny or Rocky & Bullwinkle can be a major success, and appeals to both young and old alike.

But don't overlook the touring professional attractions for your festivals and carnivals. Roanoke College (VA) used "Balloons by Lester" and "Body Art by Susan" for Family Fun Days. And, Radford University (VA) recently marched in a community parade. They brought in "Balloons by Lester" -- in costume -- to march with them!

Bethany College (KS) and Wayne State University (NE) use balloon artists "Mike da Roving Guy" and "Dave Evans" to perform at their football games. College football on a fall afternoon attracts both students and the community, and their performances were big successes.

Some schools bring in family friendly attractions for such events as Renaissance Fairs (St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia), or community festivals held on their campuses such as Thomas Nelson Community College (VA) and Eastern New Mexico State University.

### **Don't Forget Promotion**

It's always important to promote your events. It's perhaps even more important to publicize your family friendly programs, because they are reaching out to an audience not usually drawn to campus activities.

Fortunately, it can be easier to promote these events than you might realize. The first step is to think about your target audience. If it's families with children, you can put out flyers in daycare centers or send announcements home with kids from school. If it's the community you're after, then go to the city newspaper, TV and radio stations. You might not utilize these media for strictly on-campus events, but they're ideal for reaching an off-campus audience.

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Family and Alumni events can also be targeted through your school Media Relations Office. They may do targeted mailings for you to alumni or parents planning a visit to campus.

### **The Right Act**

With any show featuring a performer, choosing the right artist is crucial. Mark Nizer, award winning juggler and comedian sums it up: "It is a very difficult balance to find a performer that can entertain a diverse group. College students, parents and young children all have different sense of what is funny, entertaining and holds their attention. You need to be able to be funny (or entertaining) to a tougher high school/college age group but conservative enough to keep parents and grandparents in the game. A large part of this is the ability of the performer to be likable and honest on stage. Giving the audience a pleasant experience and not making them uncomfortable is what it's all about."

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