

# SKIDMORE

C O L L E G E

Office of Leadership Activities

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## Creating More Inclusive Events

*It's not possible to design a single event that will be of interest to everyone – that's not the goal of culturally inclusive programming. Thankfully we are a community of varied interests, and social preferences. The goal, and in fact, the responsibility of members of the Skidmore community, is to plan events that are free from the barriers that would make any interested individual feel excluded, uninvited or unwelcome at our programs.*

The work of building an event that feels inclusive of, and welcoming to, the many individuals that make up our diverse campus community begins in the very first steps of the planning process. A planning team that is itself already representative of as much social and cultural diversity as possible will yield events that offer a more inclusive environment. A planning team that is more homogenous when it comes to backgrounds, experiences and identities will likely have to work more deliberately to accomplish meaningful outreach and inclusivity. Our community will benefit from energy invested in doing what is practically possible to extend a welcome to everyone in the community – reaching across social and cultural differences to enhance the experience for everyone.

## Your Planning Team

The feeling of being “considered,” invited to, and welcome at an event begins long before the start of the event. History, legacy narratives, rumors, and successes of past events will have impact on future events – positively and negatively. Event planners who can thoughtfully evaluate the influence of the past on cultural and social inclusivity will be at an advantage.

Outreach that is done when first bringing a planning committee together can convey the first message of intention inclusion. Collaborations among organizations, departments, and social circles representing different identity demographics will broaden the scope of the design and the audience. A representative planning team will naturally incorporate different points of view, and knowledge bases, as well as broaden the connection to widening circles of potential attendees. A planning team with culturally competent participants will think to ask the kinds of questions, and tap the pertinent resources that will lead to an inclusive event. Some of these thinking points include:

- Is the date being considered coinciding with any religious holidays important to members of our community? (You can consult an [interfaith calendar](#).)
- Is the event time being considered, one that makes our event feasible for everyone we hope will attend?

- What will participants be asked to pay to attend this event? Is this price fair and as accessible as possible?
- Is the venue being considered (and its related facilities) accessible to guests in wheelchairs? Is it comfortable for others with special mobility sight or hearing concerns? **Make sure that every person with a disability, visible or not, can enter your venue and participate with dignity.**
- Is the venue one that has messages of welcome or exclusion? A bar, hotel, church or temple might carry different messages of who is and who is not welcome. A venue that requires private transportation to get to it might exclude some. Knowing the history of a place, and sharing it with guests might deepen a message of cultural consciousness (even if the cultural history of venue includes negative chapters).
- Does the core content of the program consider different populations on campus or is it focused narrowly on specific cultural identities? If the latter, is that a deliberate and celebrated program design to meet a chosen interest or need (e.g. “China Night”, “Sophomore Semi-formal”, “Transgender Awareness Week”) versus a poorly considered plan (e.g. a poetry night promoted as the “Best of the Adirondack Poets” with all 8 presenters being 25 yr.old, able-bodied, white, English speaking only, Episcopalian straight born in Saratoga). Consider inclusiveness as often as possible.
- If planning to serve alcohol, has the event been designed so that drinking alcohol neither feels like the only option, a cultural imperative, or disrespectful of those who choose not to drink? Many students will choose not to attend events where alcohol is served because they have had too many negative experiences of having their personal or religious choices being disregarded or belittled. Offer choice, non-alcohol alternatives and present them with at least as much style as the alcohol bar.
- If serving food, has the committee considered possible dietary requirements of guests vis-à-vis menu items, and serving practices (Halal or Kosher foods, vegetarian or vegan fare, common food allergies, etc.)?

Don't feel that your event planning committee needs to be expert at all cultural competencies, at every stage of the planning process. No one is! Our globally connected community is wonderfully diverse. Ask for guidance. Do research. Include knowledgeable individuals in your process.

## **There is no such thing as “neutral marketing”**

After an event is thoughtfully designed behind the scenes, you have to address similar attention to conveying the messages to your audience (and the public at large that is also experiencing your publicity even if they are not attendees). The name, subtitles, images and descriptions used to promote your event will need to be well thought; the elements of

cultural inclusivity that you hope to promote are out there in the world without the opportunity to explain or clarify them, **so plan ahead.**

Checking your messages against small but diverse “test audiences” is a smart strategy. Have you unknowingly used wording or images that will be experienced by a segment of the community as offensive or alienating? Perhaps in your home-place a message means one thing, but it may carry different meanings to many in our community. Rely on trusted advisors to help.

Often event planners will think they have created a welcoming piece of advertising that would surely be seen as an invitation to “everyone,” only to learn the week after the event that many peers felt they were not invited. Most frequently on our campus staff members will assume events are for students only unless the event is directly marketed to them. Examples abound, but taking the time, as a group – with a “many minds”

The placement of publicity materials can also carry a culturally inclusive or exclusive message. Is your only banner ad on a website that only one social group might visit? Have you flyered only certain areas of campus? Are you being thoughtful about reaching the audience you said you really want?

Possible Examples:

- Perhaps it was a dance for which all the images on the posters were of heterosexual couples - members of the LGBT community might have felt excluded. Past misperceptions sometimes have to be corrected with assertive advertising content.
- An event at the campus chapel may carry a stigma of being only for those active in a particular faith, when if publicity stated “everyone welcome” the message would be different.
- Pictures portraying a single racial grouping, or only very richly dressed people, or only American flag waivers, might be read as exclusive invitations.
- A Cultural Celebration with posters that are only written in one language would limit those who felt invited.
- Concert promotion that fails to promote wheelchair accessibility or the ability to make special needs arrangements for a sign language interpreter, may exclude individuals.

## **You really do belong here**

Culturally aware event planning, and smartly designed inclusive publicity campaigns, let your potential audience know they have been invited. The last step is to make sure they feel the same sense of belonging once they are at your event.

The design of the space, decorations, arrangement of food, drink, people, greeters, background music selections, emcees and the content of the program all need to be

thoughtfully aligned with your mission to do your best to not exclude folks. **This does not mean that all messages have to be “safe” from political and social differences, or “represent” every cultural demographic in one evening.** Educating across cultural boundaries necessitates that sometimes, some people will feel foreign to an experience or set of information – but the foreignness must not feel like oppression, exclusion, or condemnation. It means that because you have invited a broad community into your event you have a responsibility to attend to their relative safety and sense of being welcome in the space. It means that in an atmosphere of respect for differences, all will feel that they belong in the experience of learning and enjoying new things in the company of community – even while some may feel they are stretching their comfort zones.

The increased quality and richness of your programming will reward your planning team several fold. Stretch yourselves to be as inclusive as possible.

### Early Planning Stages

- Include people from different cultural groups in the planning - they will be able to offer valuable advice as well as use their own social networks to encourage greater participation.
- Make sure that every person with a disability can enter your venue and participate with dignity.
- Consider cultural festivals and religious observances when scheduling events and activities - consult with local faith groups and refer to an [interfaith calendar](#)
- Contact other clubs and offices to seek promotion of your event on their websites - inclusivity can be a selling point.
- Provide multi-lingual information about your event so that all people feel respected and included.
- Make sure that any advertising or announcements are not unintentionally and indirectly discriminating.
- Include the accessibility [symbols](#) on all promotional materials so that people with disabilities are aware that your event is accessible.

### As the Day of the Event Approaches

- Reach out and promote your event through your culturally diverse representatives – use a wide range of promotional outlets, websites and e-mail list serves.
- Make sure the advertising and signage are clearly visible to a wide range of people. And use multiple ways to advertise: posters, flyers, personal approaches, pavement chalking, etc.
- Contact other clubs and offices to assist with promotion.
- Be creative and incorporate culturally diverse methods of promotion.

### At the Event

- People with disabilities and those who are using public transportation may be on a strict schedule, so events must begin and end on time. Proper timing is a sign of respect and inclusivity.

- Be sure to accommodate for food allergies, medical disorders and cultural practices – be sure the meat is halal or kosher, according to religious dietary laws, and that there is a full range of vegetarian/vegan food, for example.
- Provide on-site childcare and attendant care whenever possible and applicable
- Evaluate your outreach by asking participants to indicate how they heard about your event.
- Made sure that alcohol is not the only thirst-quenching option.

### Final Note

Your program needs to be thoughtfully aligned with your mission to do your best to not exclude others. **This does not mean that all messages have to be “safe” from political and social differences, or “represent” every cultural demographic.** Educating across cultural boundaries necessitates that sometimes some people will feel foreign to an experience or set of information – but the foreignness must not feel like oppression, exclusion, or condemnation.