



SAEC members participate in a brainstorming session.

PROGRAMMING 101

Successfully Reinventing a Student Organization

By Greg Bluestein, University of Massachusetts

January 2009 marked the 25th anniversary of the Student Arts and Events Council at the University of Massachusetts in Boston (UMass Boston). Marking 25 years as an organization is certainly an accomplishment worth celebrating, but the remembrance of what it took to get to this point is even more entertaining for the members of the SAEC. The group's success—and longevity—were hard won.

Faded Glory

What wasn't thriving in the '80s? The country seemed to be alive and well and the SAEC was no exception. Born from the original student programming organization on campus, the SAEC was created in 1984 when the original programming organization and the newly created Student Government were split into separate organizations. The idea behind the original SAEC was to organize all of the student events on the UMass Boston campus to give students something to do during non-class time.

Through the years, however, the SAEC waned and nearly completely disappeared from campus. Consequently, different clubs would hold different events for various purposes, but there was no overall coordinating organization on the campus. This persisted until 2007 when, in the summer, newly appointed advisor Chuck Henriques met with new coordinators Samantha Rincon and Mike Metzger and decided it was time for a change in the SAEC system.

Proving Them Wrong

"We didn't so much start it over as much as we reinvented it," said Metzger. Then, the three started placing ads that September to find members to join the revitalized organization.

"People said that you wouldn't get anyone to help you unless they were paid and we just didn't agree with that," Metzger said.

They were proved right because in the time from September of 2007 to May of 2008, only two academic semesters, the SAEC went from having absolutely no members to nearly 30.

Now, as interest in the organization continues to rise, SAEC boasts 50 active members and two interns, and has evolved into a very well respected organization that is viewed as one of the premier programming organizations on the UMass Boston campus.

Secrets of Success

How was such success achieved?

When describing how they turned the program around, Rincon, Metzger and Henriques reiterated a basic theme: "Reinvent."

Every organization starts with a good idea. It wouldn't be created if that weren't the case. A note-worthy goal or a strongly pursued cause always backs each organization on any college campus. However, achieving that goal and maintaining the path to achievement is where many organizations, like UMass Boston's SAEC, hit a speed bump and lose momentum.

When that happens, that is where "reinvention" comes into play. Just because your organization is not working does not necessarily mean it is a failure or that people are not interested in its programs. However, you may need to think of a different way to achieve your organization's fundamental goals. You may have to "reinvent" how you do things.

Where to Start?

So, where do you start? Quite simply, determine what is wrong with your organization and go from there. Henriques, Metzger and Rincon realized that there were many flaws with the SAEC and chose to fix the most problematic as they began to rebuild the program.

Step 1: "Brand" the SAEC

"There was no look, no logo, no colors—there was no identity," Metzger said. "People would go to events and then notice others going on around campus, but they didn't realize that they were all strung together."

Solving this problem helped give birth to the new blue and yellow SAEC logo. Within only a year, it became one of the most highly recognized logos on campus.

Step 2: Establish a Strong Online Presence

Let's face it—almost everything is online now. Why should your organization be any different? The members of the new SAEC realized this and created a Facebook page, a website, and their own e-mail server in order to stay in touch with the students and keep them aware of their presence on campus.

Step 3: Create a Strong Bond with the Organization's Advisory Board

People need to be involved to make an organization work, so the SAEC opened its doors to the students of UMass Boston and began to encourage the ideas and volunteer efforts that could be found all over the campus. But, as you can imagine, this was not an easy task.

The SAEC members thoroughly considered and researched the topic, reading works such as Eric Erikson's *Identity Theory*, Arthur Chickering's *Vector Student Development Model*, Howard Gordon's *An Assessment of the Leadership Skills of College of Education Students at Marshall University* and Arthur Sandeen and Margaret J. Barr's *Critical Issues for Student Affairs: Challenges and Opportunities*. What they found from their studies would completely revolutionize the SAEC.

Working the Plan

With the learning that came from this research, the SAEC proposed an initial skills self-assessment. This test would provide members a clear picture of their strong and weak points, creating "defined learning domains." These domains allowed students who were most appropriate for certain tasks to be involved in events in which they would feel happy and comfortable. Also, and possibly more importantly, this assessment would show SAEC members what their weak points were and would help to encourage them to volunteer at events or become engaged in work that would help to strengthen these weak spots, making each volunteer a renaissance person in a way.

At the end of the semester, the organization employed a progress evaluation. This 360-degree peer evaluation reviewed what had happened in the past semester and evaluated the



After reinventing itself, the SAEC has been able to sponsor many successful events, such as the Opening Week Reception for students pictured above.

progress of SAEC as an organization, as well as the progress of individual members as compared to the beginning of the semester. This evaluation showed volunteers that they had indeed made progress and that their time was not wasted in volunteering with SAEC.

No Such Thing as Failure

When you have created an organization, you want to believe there is no such thing as failure. The fact that your group has been recognized as a true organization is quite an achievement in itself. But that does not mean that everything will be easy for your group. In those moments when it is difficult to accomplish your goals and the path you are following seems to have led you to a dead end, consider ways to shift the perspective of your organization and "reinvent" your approach.

You will be amazed at the results.

About the Author

Greg Bluestein is a freshman English major at the **University of Massachusetts–Boston**. He has written a number of articles for local newspapers and currently writes for *The Mass Media*, the student newspaper at the University of Massachusetts–Boston.

Spotlight to Shine on Programming Boards

What does your programming board office look like? What do programming board offices at other schools look like?

Stay tuned next fall!

If you'd like to share pictures of or stories about your programming board office, contact Erin Wilson at erinw@naca.org.