



Activity Advisors: What Matters to You? The “Why” Behind What We Do

By Jill Esplin

Stop and think before you answer this question honestly.

“Why are you an activity advisor?”

Why? With hundreds and thousands of careers to choose from, why are you an activity advisor? Why did *you* accept or apply for this position? Can you put it into a few words or phrases?

What is it that wakes you up 2 hours earlier than the rest of the teachers at your school... setting up the next pep rally, assembly or event on your campus? Why do you spend almost every lunch with students, rather than with adults? Why do you wake up at 3am with an amazing brainstorm about prom or begin to create your weekly “to do” list when you should be sleeping? Did you just say to yourself that you want to make a difference? I’ve heard that statement from a lot of activity advisors.

From my perspective, and having worked with a variety of activity advisors, the common trend is: *passion* and *commitment*. These two traits can make us do what others think is... *unthinkable!*

Passion allows us to keep going, when we just want to quit. *Commitment* is what our students and fellow staff members see. *Commitment* is the one trait that keeps us coming back each day to challenge our students to a higher level of leadership, planning and integrity.

Being an activity advisor is more than just planning a dance, rally or lunchtime activity.

First, as an activity advisor you already know that **activities have the power to bridge gaps between students and create a sense of community**. The reason for dances, assemblies, etc. is not just because of tradition, but more importantly, to create memories and experiences for

students to look forward to and want to come to school. While planning these events with our student leaders, it is so important to remind them about the reasons WHY we do things and not just focus on the colors of the centerpieces or the food at the dance. Yes, details are important, but teaching our students the value of activities and getting them to see the big picture of why we do what we do is **invaluable**. In the process they learn about passion and making a difference, which is much more than just planning a party.

Second, the reason the students plan events is to learn leadership. What a better way to teach students about communication, goal setting, budgeting and teamwork than to give them a task of planning an event from start to finish with a group of their peers. This has to be one of the **most empowering and educational leadership experiences for teens**. Personally, I have no doubt in my mind that planning winter formal, prom and assemblies in high school, and events in college, have shaped me into the leader that I am today. The question is, what do you focus on as an activity advisor? The food, decorations, making sure the party is perfect, OR the process it takes to make this amazing and memorable event happen? It is the process and teamwork that cement the leadership lessons. It is these life lessons that will last a lifetime.


So the question is now, as an activity advisor, what do you focus on? What matters the most? Is it the little details at the party? Or do you focus on creating leaders and leadership lessons from planning events that will create school spirit and memories for a lifetime.

How do we place the focus on leadership and learning and not just party planning?

1. **Plan the Process:** Each activity calls for a well thought-out plan. Encouraging our students to plan for each and every event teaches them time management, communication and teamwork. Yes, we know that students can throw together a lunchtime activity 50 minutes before the event, but what are they learning? If we are focusing on the lessons learned planning the event, then the timeline, budget and “to do” list will lead to a better event as well as learning the process. It is important to remember that the event is the outcome of the leadership lesson and learning.
2. **Do the Debrief:** After EVERY event, big or small, it is imperative that we have students debrief and talk about what went well, what we can improve on and why the event was memorable for students.
3. **Weigh the Why's:** That is right, what is the weight or value to each activity that students are planning? Ask them to explain the outcome or purpose of the event. If they say “it is just for fun,” how can we get them to think deeper and apply more meaning to the event? Ask them questions like... "Is it to create a positive school environment? To increase school attendance? To make people excited about coming to school? To build school unity?" Soon, they will come to you with the “why’s” behind the event.

4. **Focus on the Failures:** Yes, it happens. When students plan events, mistakes or missteps are bound to happen. That is okay; it is better for them to try than for us to do the work for them and make it perfect. It's important that we continue to focus on the learning and not the events. Rather than getting upset or reacting to what the students did wrong, we can emphasize what to change in the future. Seasoned activity advisors know that reaction and attitude are the most important factors for learning from mistakes. Give the students permission to fail. Really, don't you and I learn best from our mistakes? Failures are wonderful times for "teachable moments" and to celebrate the life lessons that these present.
5. **Celebrate:** It is very important to take time to celebrate the learning and the successes of each event.

As an activity advisor, you give students an opportunity to learn passion and commitment... with you as their role model. Bravo to each of you!

In addition to teaching leadership through activities, weekly leadership lessons are a powerful way to teach students about leadership. You can check out the free leadership lessons on my blog (<http://jesplin.blogspot.com>). Enjoy! 



Jill Esplin, with **Leading For Life**, specializes in leadership development and motivational messages for students, and would love to come to your school or event to speak or lead a workshop! You can reach her via e-mail at jill@LeadingForLife.com or visit www.LeadngForLife.com.