leadership
FOR STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Reaching Out

Expand Your Group's Connections

Dr. Nelson is a regular contributor to this magazine.

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Retro NETWORKING

Don't overlook traditional community organizations when you network.

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When my dad was a teenager, he had a pair of black high-top Converse All-Stars. I inherited them when I was a teen. Between then and now, we've experienced tremendous variations in athletic shoes. But sure enough, Converse has come back.

In similar fashion, social media has dominated the stage in recent years, offering high-tech ways to get and stay in touch. Yet there's a valuable asset that many who work with student leaders overlook. It's a bit retro, but it's a powerful resource that can help you take your student leader development to a new level and fund your program: old-fashioned, face-to-face networking with leaders in your community.

Some advisers who work with student governments and activities may not be familiar with the goings-on within the local business community and fraternal organizations. The primary reason is they are immersed in the culture of school culture and academics. But tapping into local organizations—such as the chamber of commerce, Rotary Club, Kiwanis International, Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), and similar entities—can significantly elevate your student leadership program. The idea of going outside the school to recruit support may seem daunting and even overwhelming in terms of time, energy, and risk, but leadership is about leveraging resources.

The philanthropic motivation of many in these groups reflects psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's developmental stage called "generativity." Around the age of 50, people begin thinking of how they can give back, leave a legacy, and empower the upcoming generation. This equates to the potential not only for raising financial support for your programs and activities but also for developing talent, increasing wisdom, and opening doors. Your community is teeming with people with leadership experience, who with a little facilitation, can become mentors and offer experiential learning and job opportunities to your students.

What you have that most other charities and civic nonprofits lack is the promise of developing student leaders. Most of the members in fraternal groups are also leaders. They are business owners, managers, CEOs, entrepreneurs, and community activists. Depending on the socioeconomics of your local demographics, members will vary in education, wealth, and expertise. But most communities have groups where the movers-and-shakers network. This is a veritable gold mine for the savvy student leadership adviser.

In our work in young leader development, we've discovered a natural affinity that older leaders have with younger ones. Although many of these people wouldn't invest their time or money in a typical child or teen group, many of them will donate time and resources to a program that is designed to identify and

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develop future leaders. The vetting process you bring is significant, because most community leaders assume that students involved in some kind of student leadership program are just that, budding leaders. Naturally, not every student government member is an organizational leader, and you may do well to extend your reach to other social influencers on your campus.
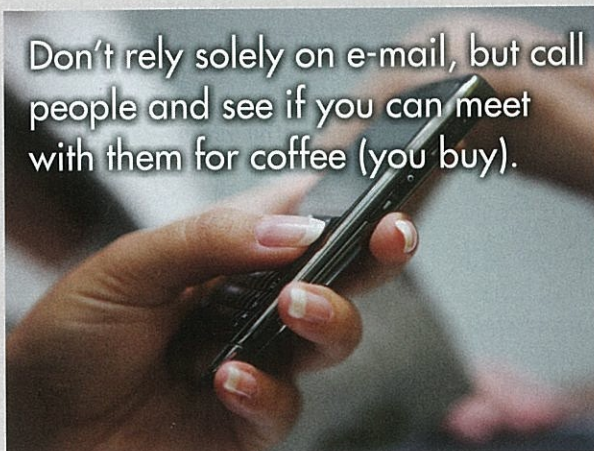
Don't feel guilty about recruiting the help of high-octane community leaders. Many of these people have an intrinsic drive to mentor, donate, and sponsor people who remind them of what they were like when they were young. The problem is that they're too busy to seek out young leaders and often lack the training to mentor protégés. In a sense, you're doing the groundwork for them.

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Begin by identifying these groups. Start with an online search of local fraternal organizations. Go to city hall and ask for information on such groups. Some smaller communities create sign collages of these civic groups at the city limits. Identify the presidents and officers with whom you can make contact. The parents of current student leaders and local alumni are two other groups that can support your student leaders. Find out who are leaders and hold roles of influence in those groups.

Don't rely solely on e-mail, but call people and see if you can meet with them for coffee (you buy).

Then contact these people. Don't rely solely on e-mail, but call people and see if you can meet with them for coffee (you buy). You're selling your program, and with most sales, you'll rarely close the deal in fewer than three interactions. It may take a dozen or more contacts. Begin by introducing yourself and your organization. If you have students who are mature and make good first impressions, bring them along. The meeting can model networking for your students as well as let civic group leaders know that yours is not a typical student group. Frequently, one commitment opens doors for others, because most leaders are themselves good at networking.

Although this effort may lie outside of your normal, expected duties and schedule, the long-term potential is well worth the investment. The bottom line is that you're developing your own booster club—much like sports teams and bands. Your school may have some sort of protocol that informs the administration about your contacts with the community. Whenever money is potentially involved, higher-ups tend to want to know about it. Still, most schools offer a lot of latitude in terms of developing your own support base. By becoming familiar with community leaders, you create opportunities that will take your student leaders to the next level.

When connecting with community leaders make sure that you:

- Invite the CEO or business professional to meet with your group.

- Ask if you can bring a group of your students to tour the company or sit through a board or staff meeting to observe leadership in action.

- Offer an array of options for support so that leaders can select one that fits their current level of interest and availability (e.g., coming to speak, sponsoring an event, or allowing students to shadow him or her).

- Develop a rapport with a civic group or leader before asking for sponsorship of a training event, and ask with confidence and specificity.

- Offer to contact local media for public relation purposes not only for the organization that is supporting you, but also for your own benefit. Other good public relations options include thank-you plaques, sponsorship mention in flyers and bulletins, and public announcements of appreciation.

- Teach your students about protocol and etiquette before interacting with a community leader. This includes what to wear, what to say and not say, and how to act. Social respect is an important leadership skill.

- Practice basic relationship essentials, including fast, professional communication; thank-you notes; and other polite behaviors. Although you know these students are budding leaders, most civic leaders are accustomed to interacting with socially savvy adult leaders, so elevating your students' demeanor will enhance the likelihood of future interactions.

- Inform your principal and district superintendent about what you're doing. Most educational leaders are interested in good relations with the community, so begin with establishing good communications within your school community. Be sure to invite the administrator to your events where civic leaders will be interacting with students. This can also help you raise the perceived value of your group's work at the school. ■

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