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San Diego State University (SDSU)

First Forty Days

Background

After the untimely death of two students at SDSU in 2004 and 2007 related to alcohol and drug abuse and other incidents on campus, SDSU's vice president for Student Affairs and vice president for Business and Financial Affairs appointed an *Ad Hoc* Alcohol Task Force to study the challenges that face the campus with respect to alcohol and other drugs. The Aztecs Nights program was fully conceptualized during the summer of 2008 based on the task force recommendation for SDSU to establish programs and activities during the first five weeks of the academic year to provide alcohol-free alternatives for incoming and returning students. More specifically, Associated Students, the SDSU student government organization, was asked to provide large, attractive alternative alcohol-free programming from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., Thursday through Saturday nights and holidays, during the first five weeks of the academic year.

Planning

Aztec Nights was a collaborative effort that included students, staff, and administrators from across campus. Representatives from Student Affairs, Associated Students, and Business Affairs worked together to provide a framework for planning and implementing Aztec Nights. Three teams were established to carry out the mission of Aztec Nights: a management team, planning team, and implementation team.

The management team was established to provide leadership to Aztec Nights. It was composed of five campus administrators: director of Student Activities and Campus Life, director of New Student and Parent Programs, director of Residential Education, coordinator for Alcohol and Other Drug Initiatives, and executive director of Associated Students. This team was responsible for approving and monitoring the budget, developing policies and procedures, resolving university challenges and issues, and approving events that would be included in Aztec Nights.

Two established on-campus committees, the Welcome Week Committee and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Alternative Behavioral Committee, served as the planning team for Aztec Nights. The planning team was made up of staff from Student Affairs and Associated Students, as well as student representatives from Associated Students, Greek Life, SDSU Ambassadors, other student clubs and organizations, and graduate students in the Master of Arts Program in Postsecondary Educational Leadership with a Specialization in Student Affairs.

Primary responsibilities of the planning team included creating events for Aztec Nights, developing a budget, planning the details, coordinating logistics, designing a marketing strategy, and facilitating the events.

The Aztec Nights Program was designed to “provide (a) vibrant campus nightlife and social opportunities” for students, primarily students new to campus (freshmen and transfers) “to become fully engaged in positive, substance-free social and educational activities.” Optimally, Aztec Nights would serve as an alternative introduction to campus life at SDSU by showing incoming students that friendships could be made, enjoyment could be had, and bonds could be forged without relying on alcohol or other drugs to lessen the personal and social anxiety that attends being new in a university setting. A subsidiary aim of social norming instilled the idea in these students that meaningful social interactions could not only occur outside the traditional Greek partying scene but attract the interest and involvement of fellow students also freshly arrived on campus.

Program Scope

The Aztec Nights program ran for the first five weeks of the fall 2008 term, kicking off on August 29 and ending on September 27. All activities occurred on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday evenings between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. During this period, a total of 17 events took place, with attendance ranging from a high of 4,500 students at the Red & Black Dance to a low of 150 at Rock the Vote Open Mike. Residential and commuter students participated almost equally in the activities. At least 16,000 students attended these various events. The approximate cost of Aztec Nights tallied \$400,000. As steward of collected student activity fee monies, Associated Students appropriately assumed the largest share of expense, followed by Student Affairs and Business Affairs.

Assessment Method

A comprehensive evaluation of the Aztec Nights was initiated at the conclusion of the programming. Three separate teams were charged with assessing Aztec Nights, using quantitative and qualitative research methods. These teams focused, respectively, on (1) an Aztec Nights Participants Survey constructed and administered by the office of Student Testing, Assessment and Research; (2) qualitative, multiple debriefings of Aztec Nights participants/stakeholders facilitated by the Management Team; and (3) judicial statistics provided by the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities.

Key Findings (by team)

Survey Team (number of respondents: 1,522)

- Student participants were more likely to feel that the campus was friendly and supportive than nonattendees, yet also more likely to be feeling homesick than nonattendees, indicating an emotional need to get involved with Aztec Nights activities.
- The overwhelming majority of student participants (92–97 percent) did not drink alcohol before or after an event.
- White students were overrepresented as participants (53.6 percent), while Latino students were underrepresented (17.4 percent) as participants. Greek students were similarly overrepresented in their level of participation compared with non-Greek students.
- Residential students were more likely to attend events than commuter students, but commuters indicated a higher level of enjoyment and stayed longer at events.
- Eighty-two percent of all respondents stated they would attend future

events and indicated the experience made them feel more “connected” to campus.

- Overall attendance declined in later weeks of the program.

Debriefing Team

- The three most highly attended events, in order, were ARC After Dark, the Red & Black Dance, and the Campus Carnival. These events took place during the first two weeks of Aztec Nights, and student attendance, though still significant for the duration, diminished each subsequent week.
- Despite its positive effect, a number of factors hampered Aztec Nights—limited planning time, lack of clear “ownership” for the program, strained cooperation between key partners (e.g., Student Affairs and Associated Students), the high cost of services/facilities/staffing charged by internal partners, and so on—which need to be resolved.
- University police alcohol/drug incidence reports during the first five weeks of the fall 2008 term declined by 50 percent, from 36 during the same period in 2007 to 18 in 2008.
- A consensus arose from those who participated in the debriefings that a healthier on-campus climate was created by Aztec Nights and an important “new tradition” worth sustaining was started.
- Funding for program needs to be institutionalized rather than cobbled together late in the planning process. Contributions from Student Affairs, Business Affairs, and Associated Students need to be proportionate to the base of resources available to each of these entities.

Judicial Statistics from Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities

Comparing August and September 2007 with these same months in 2008—the period which spanned the five weeks of Aztec Nights—the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities provided the following data:

- The number of alcohol violations adjudicated by SRR was down by 74 percent in August and 56 percent in September 2008.
- The number of illegal drug violations adjudicated by SRR decreased by 76 percent in August and 46 percent in September 2008.
- The total number of violations involving alcohol (present in a room with, DUI, etc.) declined by 77 percent in August and 50 percent in September 2008.

Summary of Results

Aztec Nights was an expensive program, but the results were dramatic. Comparing September 2007 and September 2008, alcohol violations decreased by 56 percent, and drug violations were down 46 percent. These declines occurred in spite of stepped-up enforcement, demonstrating that it was not a case of “students were getting away with more.” Anecdotal accounts from community neighbors said the neighborhood was quieter than ever. There were also reductions in self-reported drinking in surveys that indicate that setting the tone of responsible socializing early on in the academic year may have longer-term benefits. After the five weeks were up, SDSU recorded a bump in violations and problems, but the numbers were not at the level typical of previous semesters’ first weeks. Reductions in violations were present in October and November as well. Other encouraging results were that those who attended an Aztec Nights event were more likely to feel the campus was friendly and felt less isolated than those who did not attend.

Recommendations for Aztec Nights 2009 and Beyond

A host of recommendations have been assembled in the detailed reports delivered by each of the three assessment teams. Their recommendations were consistent enough to be grouped into several thematic categories that future planners can use to sharpen the focus and ultimately the effect of Aztec Nights:

1. Aztec Nights must be endorsed by the leadership of Student Affairs and Business Affairs, with clear direction given to and expectations shared with Associated Students for their contributions to it. Commitments to budget, staff support, and facility use must be made, honored, and sustained.
2. Students, especially Associated Students' Executive Committee, Council, and CASE, should be more involved in planning future Aztec Nights. One suggestion was to appoint at least one AS Executive Committee member as lead liaison to the formal design team for Aztec Nights 2009.
3. Both the structure (length) and content (type of events) should be reviewed and adapted. It is conceivable that a three- or four-week programming model may deliver the same positive results if the events themselves better meet the needs of students as expressed by survey data and attendance rates.
4. The alcohol ban on fraternity and sorority socials should continue and mirror the length (number of weeks) of the Aztec Nights program.
5. A large-scale, coordinated marketing/publicity campaign needs to occur in advance of Aztec Nights to inform students and generate excitement.

Institution Characteristics:

Location: San Diego, California
Enrollment: 35,832
Governance: Public
Setting: Urban

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