Margolis Healy’s 10 Essential Steps for Safe Campus Special Events

Universities and colleges conduct, manage, and host special events in support of their core missions to develop and educate students and their greater communities. These events are growing in number and size as institutions seek to make efficient use of their facilities, and include concerts, speakers, dances, community events, theater, art exhibits and more.

The success, or failure, of an event can impact the safety and security of students, faculty, staff and guest and significantly alter an institution’s image. Over the last several years, we have witnessed an uptick in litigation against colleges and universities that have experienced negative incidents at their campus special events, ranging from alcohol-fueled disruptions to homicides.

While no institution is immune from a catastrophic critical incident occurring at a campus event, there are prudent planning steps we can take to ensure that attendees are able to enjoy campus events reasonably free from harm. Through collaborative efforts, institutions can mitigate risks and build upon institutional strengths to ensure resources align for a successful event. Based upon recent, original Margolis Healy research, we’ve developed the following 10 Essential Steps that institutions should consider to effectively plan for safe events:

1. **Multi-Disciplinary Approach**

Developing plans and approaches to the various events hosted on our campuses requires a multi-disciplinary strategy that brings together public safety, student affairs, faculty, facilities, general counsel, residential life, student center, student government, risk management, and local police, fire, and EMS officials, to collaborate on developing policies, procedures and systems to ensure the safety of events.

2. **Event Pre-Planning & Coordination**

In advance of an event, we recommend institutions conduct pre-event orientations and review relevant, policies and assignments (e.g., alcohol policies and staffing strategy). Campuses should conduct relevant training for all staff involved with managing the event. This training could involve a wide range of issues such as confronting difficult behavior and an overview of institutional policies and procedures. Prior to the event start, the institutional representative(s) responsible for the event should identify and mitigate readily identifiable hazards.
Institutions will ideally have clear policies for event ticketing and access, credentialing, alcohol and other drugs, noise and disruption threshold, and other policies and procedures relevant to the type of event, including its location and the time of day it’s being held. Institutions should also consider policies that direct and guide faculty and staff who may host academic or other events outside of normal channels.

Security and student affairs personnel should receive training in the aforementioned policies, along with how to manage and control crowds, orderly evacuation planning, and basic first aid and safety planning.

We strongly encourage institutions to develop staffing rubrics — thresholds for the type and number of staff required for events based on the type of event, venue, location, and event. Some events may require a police presence in addition to security staffing, student affairs staff, and students. Other events may not require a dedicated police presence.

Students can be a valuable addition to security and event staffing. If an institution uses students for event staffing, then the students must be properly vetted, trained, and positioned. The university or college should be clear on the expectations for the students, what they will and won’t be allowed to do, and where they shall be positioned for the event.
7 Venue Considerations

When selecting the venue for an event, institutions must take into account the type of event, including projected crowd size, duration of the event, rain locations (if outdoors), and anticipated problems. Selecting a small venue for a highly anticipated speaker may create tension and frustration at the entrance, and lead to problems that could have been avoided. Likewise, tailgating parties and a lack of security presence outside a venue may lead to problems inside the venue.

8 Off-Campus Events

Institutions frequently use spaces off campus to host events, or sanction events that take place off campus. Appropriate policies and guidance should be developed that maintain the same relative control of the event, even if it's happening off-campus.

9 After-Action Reviews

We recommend that institutions conduct an after-action review, or “hot wash,” for most major events. The focus is not what didn't go well, but instead what would we do differently next time? What would make the management of the event better or more efficient? What lessons were learned? By focusing on the “next time” we avoid blame and finger pointing while gathering the information needed to ensure continuing success of our event management.

10 Use of NIMS & ICS Framework

The National Management Incident System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS), developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and applied in the educational environment, are designed to provide a functional management system to handle critical and special events. We recommend that institutions adopt NIMS/ICS for pre-event planning, event management, and post-event follow up. For more information please visit, FEMA's NIMS and ICS webpages. For additional information, visit the Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students or the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center.