

# How Cultural Events Programs Build the Academic and Campus Community

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## Abstract

Focus group interviews with undergraduate seniors looking back on their first-year and subsequent experiences attending on-campus cultural events were transcribed, coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach in order to create an account of their role in shaping the college experience. This account includes the outcomes articulated by students as well as the hindrances and affordances that affect those outcomes. The findings have implications for those designing first-year academic and co-curricular programming.

## Theory

Attending out-of-class, on-campus cultural events such as lectures, performances, and discussions may contribute to **involvement** as well as providing some **opportunities for intellectual growth** (Kuh, 1995), since “student encounters with ideas different from those they already hold and with people different from themselves are related to...increased knowledge acquisition and subject mastery; growth in higher cognitive skill development; more positive self-concept and self-esteem; greater development of interpersonal and leadership skills; more inclusive sociopolitical, gender-role, racial/ethnic attitudes; and increased civic and community involvement” (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007, p. 275). Additionally, the presence of an active program of on-campus events may thus be connected to the kinds of college experiences that contribute to **liberal arts outcomes** such as inclination to inquire and lifelong learning as well as intercultural effectiveness (Siefert et al., 2008). Furthermore, such events afford students with opportunities to accrue a kind of “**cultural capital**” (Braxton et al., 2013) associated with academic success (Dumais, 2002) and to develop the **social and political awareness** that has been linked to the development of **critical thinking skills** (Tsui, 2000).

## References

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## Method

*At a small, residential liberal arts institution, researchers conducted eight focus group interviews of first-semester fourth-year students (n=58) about their experiences with attendance at cultural events during their first year of college. Some of these students had been required to attend a specific number of events and others were under no such requirement. Semi-structured interviews began with a question about students' memories of campus cultural events during their first year and then moved to a broader conversation about their experience attending on-campus events across their college career. Facilitators had a general framework of questions related to campus event attendance. Not all questions were asked at each focus group. Each focus group lasted one hour.*

*The focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then iteratively coded, first for turns or exchanges (instances of response to interviewer prompts) and then twice for content using a grounded theory approach, with the researchers severally (at least in pairs) reading and reaching agreement on a set of codes and their assignment to turns. The transcripts ranged in length from 35 to 97 turns, comprising a total of 467 turns in sum. This interpretive coding process assigned a total of 588 codes across 22 categories related to learning outcomes, broadened experience, entertainment/diversion, campus community and identity, and motivations, incentives, and disincentives for attendance, with some turns being assigned multiple content codes.*

## Student Outcomes

**General Knowledge:** A non-specific claim to have learned something. *“My freshman year I enjoyed the lectures that I went to and I learned something new every time that otherwise I wouldn’t have known anything about.”*

**Content Knowledge:** A claim to have learned about something specific. *“One [event I recall] was the malaria in Latin America presentation. I think that was my sophomore year, and it was just interesting to see how through malaria worked and a couple other agents that Latin America was conquered.”*

**Related to Academic Program:** A claim about the relevance of a cultural event to a student’s academic major. *“The one I think I liked the most was [a professor’s] metabolic scaling one because now I’ve been talking to [my professor] a lot, and you can actually apply those same concepts with trilobites and like fossils.”*

**Events of Consequence:** A claim expressing an understanding of a cultural event as a signal moment in the student’s experience. *“For whatever reason, one the things that occurs to me about this is that 10 years from now there will be no students, no college students who have a memory of ever meeting or seeing a Holocaust survivor in person. This is about the end of that kind of opportunity. It’s probably important that you had that chance.”*

**Broadening Horizons:** A claim expressing some aspect of the liberal arts ethos or other appreciation for the breadth of human endeavor. *“[Cultural events] bring a different perspective to what I’m used to. College is very different than rural central Pennsylvania, and so you get to see different perspectives, different views, and it makes you think.”*

**Spurred Action:** A claim to have taken some action or exhibited some behavior in response to attending an event. *I remember going to one freshman year, it was one of my last cultural events, I needed to get one done, and it was an art show. Ever since then, I’ve taken a lot more art class than I would have thought. I’ve taken more than the requirement.”*

**Understanding of Social Norms & Behaviors:** A claim related to the application of social standards, conventions, or expectations to behavior at events. *“One of the best pieces of advice that I’ve gotten in my 4 years here was from [a professor]. He said ‘whenever you’re at a presentation or a lecture like that, try to come up with at least one question that you could ask or something that you could get involved in a discussion with, and you’ll walk away from that presentation or lecture so much better because of that.’ I think that goes even beyond lectures and cultural events because even when listening to somebody, listen and form some kind of question or dialogue and you’ll walk out of that so much better because you got something out of it.”*

**Entertainment/Diversion:** A claim to have enjoyed or appreciated an event or the virtuosity of a performer. *“I would say definitely, especially in music, which is definitely not my thing at all. To see someone achieve that high of a level of perfection and was just really really awesome.”* Includes broader claims about entertainment as well. *“I think I would’ve transferred out of [the school] if we didn’t have cultural events...[the campus’s location] is a beautiful town, but not very culturally diverse, and...there’s not much to do around here. Having the [cultural events series], having concerts, and dinners, and whatever it enriches your experience. It enriched my experience. Just having something to do at night that isn’t homework is nice. You can kind of relax.”*

**Peer Relations:** A claim related to strengthening connections with friends or peers. *“I went to dance ensemble. I go to the showcases because I have guy friends that dance, and I just know a lot of the other people in dance ensemble.”*

**Campus/Community Identity:** A claim related to stronger identification with the campus or community. *“Everyone can gain something from [a cultural event], but it doesn’t have to be all the same thing. I think that’s kind of what [the college] maybe is. We’re all here, but we’re not all gaining the same thing out of it.”*

## Key Considerations for Administering Cultural Events Programs

Because of the variation in students’ native and often unspoken assumptions about the purpose of on-campus cultural events, some effort should be devoted by program administrators to developing and managing student expectations about those events, via establishing motivations for attendance and ensuring affordances for attention and knowledge retention. Additionally, the intended outcomes of the program should be understood, whether those are community building, student enculturation, or the development of liberal arts values and lifelong learning skills. Finally, ensuring active participation by faculty and their collaboration with student life staff to promote events and incorporate them into class is important.