



Anniversary Celebrations: An Overview

One of the great advantages that we have in working for the schools and parishes that have brought people together, often for lifelong connection, is that we can offer them the chance to celebrate the institution and their own association with it. Pay attention to the history of your school; help others be aware of the history and, by all means, acknowledge the milestones that occur with all the attention that they warrant.

At least a year before the beginning of the celebration scope the broad outline of plan (general goals, focus, calendar, leadership, investment) and plan a *school driven* agenda that invites participation of all stakeholders.

Be careful that everything you plan is within the “bandwidth” – or is not too much of a stretch – of your anniversary team. This is a chance to display your school at its very best; don’t bite off more than you can chew and then choke!

Overall Guidelines

1. Include students, faculty, parents, parishioners, neighbors, business associates and all ages of alumni in a meaningful way
2. Focus on history and the opportunity to engage / educate about the way your history distinguishes your school.
3. Be realistic about what the leadership / volunteer community in your school can manage in terms of additional events or programs during the celebration year.
4. Do not ignore the opportunity to communicate the history, vision, strategy of your school and the stories of the individuals who are part of it.
5. Bring together a planning committee of people strategically chosen for their affiliation, their talents, their commitment to your parish and school.
6. Do not ignore the opportunity to invite stakeholders to invest in your school. They expect to be asked to invest.

Goals

1. Financial goals: This is a wonderful opportunity to build community, yes, but that does not mean that it is not also a wonderful opportunity to secure investment. Plan to make money.
2. Process goal. I worked on an event once with a declared objective of the committee that we were all still on speaking terms when the event was over. Plan to use a process that is inclusive, visionary and fun.
3. Event goals. Plan to have x number of events that are smoothly executed and attended by x number of people. Be sure that you know what your committee will think of as successful – from the very beginning – so that you are all rowing this boat in the same direction. Plan to succeed.

4. Educational goals. All of your constituent groups should be engaged in learning more about the history of your school. Plan to teach.

5. Participation goals. Everyone to whom this milestone matters should be engaged in some way, even if it is the chance to read about your school's story. This event (not the party, the milestone itself) should be a story in your local paper. Plan to get it there.

Focus

Try to maintain a good balance between history and future. This is where the advancement office and the Board can work together beautifully in taking a 360 degree view of the institution. It is vital that you honor the experience that your alumni had while they were at your school; that you recognize their part of your story. It is also crucial that you are prepared to take full advantage of this moment (these moments) in the sun. You have the attention of a greater audience than you usually enjoy. Talk to them about the strategic plan; the school goals for this year and for the next five, ten, twenty-five years.

Calendar

When do you want to start, when do you want to finish? Will you do one major event or more than one? Do you have annual events in your community that lend themselves to being rebranded for the anniversary? (For instance, the Centennial Golf Outing; the Golden Jubilee Gala.)

Are there dates that you have to avoid in order to coordinate with other community organizations? (If your local high school always does their gala on the second Saturday in November don't plan an event for that weekend.) Is there a family you intend to honor, or a celebrity alumnus you hope will emcee? Perhaps you choose your dates by their availability – about a year ahead of time.) One last calendar thought: Don't pick a holiday weekend unless what you are planning is a casual event. For instance, Thanksgiving weekend is a good time for an open gym for young alumni but not a good time for a benefit dinner. Christmas is on Friday? Sunday morning might be a good time for an Open House / buffet breakfast for alumni but not for an auction.

One more thing to consider when you are planning your year is the state of your buildings and grounds. If you hope to have the gym floor refinished before you host a dinner there you have to allow for the time it will take for the floor to cure – and find out what the gym usage is like in the time you are considering. Think about the big things you want to finish but don't forget the small things: Want something painted? Allow time for the odor to dissipate.

Events

A few suggestions that can be combined into a few special weekends during the year or produced as individual events. (Clustering a few events in a weekend makes it more attractive for alumni to visit from out of town.) Keep in mind the goals: financial, process, educational and participation that will help you decide on and plan for your events.

- Mass and brunch
- 5K
- Block party or picnic

- Golf outing
- All class reunion
- Gala
- Auction
- Dinner dance
- Alumni interviews
- House walk
- School tours

Communication

Begin with the communication program that you have in place: a school newsletter? Parish bulletins? Website? Supplement that program as you are able but always holding your internal capacity for the work in mind. A weekly column in the parish bulletin? An extra “all anniversary” edition of a newsletter? Build a communication calendar as part of the early planning process remembering to communicate the “big picture” about your institution: history, vision, strategy and invitation.

Build a brand for this milestone, one that is identifiable as being affiliated with your school, but distinct at the same time. Determine how extensively you want to use the brand and plan accordingly. Are you going to develop new letterhead? How will it be used and how much design work or printed materials do you need?

Publicity / Promotion

Good publicity costs you nothing other than time. Put together a good communications calendar that includes outreach to your constituents using every tool you have; local press; friends of your community; other events. All of these things help put your story and your project in focus.

You need someone who can write; and you need to give that person access to everything you have about your school’s history.

It is essential that you have talked about budget for print materials: newsletters and invitations are the most important pieces for you to produce. They do not have to be fancy but their quality will make a statement about your anniversary event, your school, your vision for the future and your viability as a sound philanthropic investment.

- Have dedicated pages on your website for history, plans for the celebration, focus features on programs or individuals that are part of your story.
- Use Facebook and your email marketing program (Vertical Response, Constant Contact, MailChimp?) for quick bites of information and then directions to “read more” on your website.
- Does your local press prefer that you submit a press release or a full article? Find out; see if they are willing to run a series of articles about your history—and your vision for the future.

Leadership

There are some obvious candidates in every community and they should all be involved in some way. Avoid handing this project over to one group of people (HSA, School Board, Parish Council, etc.) Instead, invite people to work together on this project – and include people from other groups in your community: the faculty, seniors, alumni and students. (The way to keep this a school focused celebration and still to get a broad base of leadership is to start the conversation early, present an outline of the plan to the people who have to be on board. The pastor? Pastoral staff? Etc.) If Mrs. Willis has organized every party the parish has ever had be sure she is part of the team; and she wants to do a potluck in the parish hall don't dismiss her idea, just don't make it the main event.

Invite a manageable-sized general planning committee that will meet monthly. Eventually you will need subcommittees for publicity, events, communication, retail – these should be the organic outcome of general planning committee meetings. Be sure that the organizational chart is clear to everyone—we all do better when we know who we are in an organization and what is expected of us—and that subcommittees are empowered to make decisions and then report those decisions.

Investment / Giving

The school will have to make its own investment in this celebration – and the investment required grows with the scope of the celebration. (Printing and mailings, design work, website rebuild, work on the building or grounds, deposits on venue or catering, etc.) Your goal, whether you are doing one benefit dinner or a year's worth of activities and programs and a published book at the end of the year, is to invite people into philanthropy and therefore, to make money.

Be prepared to talk about the “production” budget well in advance of any needs so that the people who have to help make the funds available have been informed or consulted and are not taken by surprise. At the same time, talk about the revenue goals and how they will be best directed. A special Centennial Scholarship Fund? Endowment? Library expansion? A need that speaks of the future, of strategic planning and still tugs at heartstrings is always appropriate but it is necessary for an anniversary giving program. If you are planning a yearlong celebration, though, be careful that you continue to fund the operating budget as necessary; the celebration should bring in new revenue and not move last year's fundraising over to this new purpose.

The initial planning should include the discussion of how your community will be invited to participate in this initiative. The most basic and essential move is to have a full description of the new program on your website and include the program in your online giving options. Promote the program with a brief video. You will keep the invitation to give in all publications – not as an “ask” necessarily but as story. The second essential element is a specific ask at your main event.

Every leader in your community should be on board with the fundamental importance of this opportunity to give. (If you think that there are doubters in your midst be sure you revisit this notion periodically throughout the planning process. Do not be swayed.) You have had the ears of your extended family for months: the chance to talk to them about the roots and the vision of your school community. Give them the chance to invest now. They will expect it; in fact, many of them will be excited to be part of raising a bunch of money at the amazing celebration of your community.

Someone must speak to this end at your gala and, optimally, you will show a brief video (no more than five minutes) about your school's history and the boys and girls who are writing the current chapter. The most

effective way to raise money using the spotlight of a major event is with a paddle raise, at which people raise their hands to give, not to bid, just to give.

Special Projects

Just a few ideas of ways that your community can mark the special occasion in addition to the events listed above.

Commemorative Book – a lot of work, usually a significant investment, however, if your community does not have one, and there is a subcommittee that would like to produce one, proceed but with caution.

Gift shop – nice to have commemorative items, even nicer if you can produce something special that doesn't have too much of a shelf life. You don't want to end up with a lot of inventory.

Memorial brick garden – something every school or parish should have and a nice item to push during an anniversary year. “Buy your own little piece of St. Joe's.” “Carve your message about St. Joe's in stone.”
Wonderful ongoing project

Building project – Dependent entirely upon size and passion of your leadership; not something to do just because this is a good opportunity to do it.

Lecture series – about the history of your neighborhood or your school or community; or the Catholic Church in your area, etc.

Alumni in the classroom series – easiest way there is to help current students understand that they are part of something big; and great way to connect those students with real, live people who sat in their desks long ago.

Alumni basketball / soccer / volleyball tournament – fun, easily organized by the college aged alumni who once spend all their time in your gym or on your fields. This is not intended to raise money but to raise spirits.

Alumni and student art fair / concert / show – you really need a strong, well-respected leader to pull this off but it could be a huge boon to your school.

Student / alumni communication – Do your fifth graders learn to write letters? Ask their teacher if they could write letters to alumni, asking questions about what St. Michele was like when they were here. The kids will want to read the responses; and you hang the correspondence on lockers for the open house.

Some Final Thoughts

Refer again (and again) to your goals during the planning process. Continue to monitor internal capacity. Determine your personal priorities for the celebration; know the priorities of the key members of your team. Be sure everyone understands their responsibilities. Encourage sub-committee formation and meetings; encourage brief reports for full committee meetings. Use a meeting format that is respectful of time, process and personal feelings. Seek consensus where you can and compromise where you cannot find consensus. Enjoy the planning and the production and your school and school community will be richer for it.

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