

## Reach Out and Involve Someone

Advisers of student clubs and organizations sometimes become frustrated with the level of involvement in their groups. It often seems as if the same students participate in everything and the majority of the student body doesn't get involved with the activity program offerings.

Veteran advisers understand that involvement in student clubs and organizations, with their hands-on approach to planning and carrying out projects and events, can teach students things that strictly classroom-based educational situations cannot. Students learn to work with diverse people and gain a stronger network of friends. They develop organization, communication, and interpersonal skills in getting peers to help with projects. They develop confidence as they tackle project planning and rise to the challenges involved. The types of real-world problem solving student leaders face in student activities can't be duplicated by word problems or case studies in a textbook.

Advisers also realize that being involved in student activities helps students feel a connection to school that often provides students with a reason for being

there or motivates them to improve their academic performance so they can stay involved.

In addition to these benefits, a recent report by SADD and Liberty Mutual Group, *Teens Today 2004*,



reports that teenagers who challenge themselves by taking positive risks, such as joining a club, running for office, or volunteering to perform community service, are more likely than those who don't to avoid alcohol and drug use. The report reveals that teens who take positive risks are 20% more likely than teens

who do not take positive risks to avoid alcohol and other drugs, and 42% more likely to avoid drinking because of concerns about academic performance.

With all these good reasons to participate in student activities, why don't more students take advantage of what's available? There are many reasons—busy schedules, other interests, after-school commitments such as jobs and younger siblings to care for—but for a large number of students it can be intimidating to join a new group. Student leaders and advisers involved in clubs and organizations often forget what it was like before they were involved. For an uninvolved student, it's a risky proposition

to show up at a meeting where people already have established routines and relationships. Will they be accepting of a new person? Will there be anything the new person can contribute to the group or even participate in? Group leaders might think they are being welcoming by making an announcement that “new people are welcome to come to the XYZ Club meeting,” but if you are sincere about wanting to involve more new people, you'll have to make more of an effort than that.

### Personal Recruiting

Sometimes recruiting new members is as simple as asking. Every time NEA does a survey on why nonmembers have not joined the association, the number one reason is that they were “never asked to join.” In most groups, the majority of members came to their first meeting because someone in the club asked them if they wanted to come. The simple act of inviting a person to attend a meeting greatly reduces the intimidation factor. Now, instead of wondering what type of reception they'll receive if they just show up, the newcomer will feel more comfortable knowing he or she was asked to attend. There are many ways invitations can be extended:

- The adviser can identify students who might be interested in

the activities of the group and mention an upcoming meeting or opportunity for involvement. Just saying, "Pat, I think you'd be good for this group," might be all the encouragement a student needs, particularly if the invitation comes from a person with whom the student has a good rapport.

- Faculty members often know students who have a particular talent or who might benefit from becoming involved in an activity. Send a letter to the faculty identifying the qualities and skills sets you are looking for in members and asking them to identify students who might be interested in joining if asked. Ask them to encourage the students to get involved in your organization. Or, send the students a letter of invitation saying, "a faculty member has identified you as a student who might be interested in...". This works particularly well when your activity has a curricular tie, such as asking the English teachers to recommend students for newspaper staff.
- Develop an "each one reach one" campaign and ask each member to bring at least one new person to the next meeting.
- Brainstorm with your student leaders a list of people who might be interested in joining. Organize a group of current members to make personal contacts, either by visits or phone calls, to invite the potential member to get involved.

## Get the Word Out

Another reason students often don't get involved in activities is that they don't know about them.

With announcements and posters all over the school, advisers sometimes find it hard to believe that students could be so oblivious, but in this media-saturated world, students have become good at tuning out what doesn't seem relevant to them.

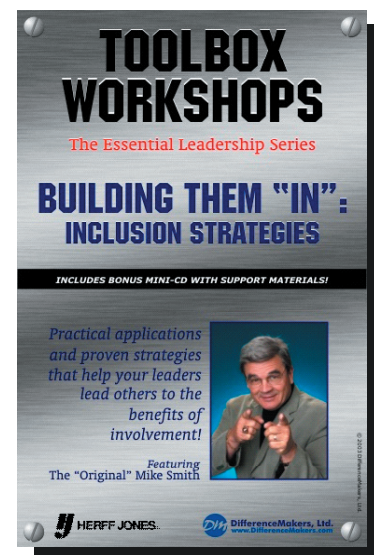
Publicize the accomplishments and activities of your group on a regular basis. If people don't know what you do, why would they want to be a part of it? Your organization's strongest recruitment tool is word of mouth. If kids are talking about it, interest will grow and others will want to get in on the fun. To help raise awareness of your activities, try some of these:

- When making announcements, mention who is sponsoring the activity, and be sure that every poster or flier you hang publicizing an upcoming event has "Sponsored by XYZ Club" on it.
- Create a bulletin board, display case, or a Web page that is kept current with photos and other items showcasing the activities and accomplishments of the group.
- Design colorful, graphically attractive T-shirts for members and wear them on days that you are sponsoring an activity.
- Publicly thank student leaders for their work organizing different activities.
- Communicate with parents through the PTA, student handbook, school newsletter, etc. Keep parents apprised of what your group is doing; often parents find out about worthwhile activities and encourage their students to get involved.

- Create a hallway display with a supply of informational brochures about your group and its activities. Put a "take one" sign next to it and be sure the brochure includes information on how students can get involved.

## Positive Reception

When you are successful at attracting new members, be sure to get them involved right away in the group's activities. All the work that goes in to attracting a new person could go down the drain if he or she shows up at a meeting and is ignored. Talk to your group members about developing a welcoming attitude and being open to new people. Develop a standard protocol for what happens when a new person shows up. Give the new person some responsibility, pair them up with a veteran member as a buddy, and be sure they feel a part of the group. That sense of belonging will keep them coming back.



Building Them "IN" Toolbox Workshops Series is an essential series that includes practical applications to help leaders get others involved. Contact your local Herff Jones Professionals for details.