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Engagement Opportunities at Syracuse University

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Engagement Opportunities at Syracuse University

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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April 2010

Honors Capstone Project in Public Relations

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Date: _____

ABSTRACT

Hillel at Syracuse University is an organization on campus with the mission of, “Creating a diverse, dynamic, and welcoming Jewish community on the Syracuse University Campus” (“Hillel at Syracuse University,” 2009). Hillel offers a wide variety of programs in order to fulfill the aforementioned mission statement including:

- Leadership Opportunities
- Community Service Experiences
- Cultural and Religious Events
- Educational and Informational Sessions
- Student Facilities including Gym, Kosher Dining Hall, Library, and so on

When exploring Hillel’s various opportunities, there is one program in particular that reaches out to students in a way that no other program has done before.

FreshFest, Hillel’s pre-orientation program, is open to all incoming and transfer students, and is planned and run by the Hillel staff and upperclassman facilitators. FreshFest includes the opportunity for students to move into their dormitories early, meet upperclassman and other incoming students prior to the start of classes, learn more about the Syracuse University campus, participate in community service projects and other social activities.

In 2009, Hillel’s FreshFest program was the largest pre-orientation program among all the programs offered by the university, hosting over 100 incoming and transfer students and 35 upperclassman facilitators. FreshFest is not only a terrific opportunity for the participants, but it also enables Hillel to fulfill its mission statement and increase publicity and awareness on the Syracuse University campus and will continue to do so for years to come.

This Capstone Project closely examines how FreshFest directly impacts Hillel’s presence on campus by looking at the planning, execution and promotion of the program itself as well as providing key recommendations and suggestions for the future of the program. Further, this project will also look at how FreshFest satisfies Hillel’s mission statement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	1
Table of Contents	2
Preface	3
Acknowledgements.....	7
Advice to Future Honors Students	8
Capstone Project Body	
History.....	9
Phases of FreshFest.....	12
Research and Analysis.....	15
Planning and Execution	18
Evaluation.....	29
Recommendations for the Future.....	36
Sources Cited and Consulted.....	40
Appendices	41
Summary of Capstone Project	56

PREFACE

When I was deciding what to do for my Capstone Project, many ideas crossed my mind...*starting my own business...launching a public relations campaign for an organization on campus...examining how public relations plays a key role in the success of non-profit organizations, and so on.* However, after a great deal of reflection, I realized I wanted to do something that I was not only interested in, but also something that I was passionate about. I knew I wanted my Capstone to mean something to me and I did not want it to be another project I *had* to complete. Throughout my college career I have been involved in Hillel Jewish Student Union on the SU campus. There, I have found a home, friends and activities I can participate in. Soon, it was apparent that I had found my Capstone Project topic and there was no doubt in my mind that I would enjoy this assignment immensely.

Prior to my freshman year at Syracuse University, I worked at an overnight camp in Conover, WI. Contained in my own private world of swimming in the lake, all-night staff meetings and 15 campers running around screaming, I had no idea what was on the road to come. After an anxious phone call from my mother, I found myself on the Syracuse University orientation Web site. Not knowing anyone, never having actually

been to the University campus and being completely terrified to grow up and go to college, I looked into the multiple pre-orientation programs that the University offered.

The website shows various different types of programs ranging from an outdoor adventure to a Build-A-Home type program. However the program that caught my eye was Hillel's pre-orientation program, FreshFest. The program seemed to achieve each criterion I wanted for a pre-orientation program:

- Meeting other students
- Getting a feel for the SU campus
- Learning about places off-campus
- Incorporating community service aspects

It seemed too good to be true, but after three days of fun, new friends, and Syracuse pride, I knew that this program was more than just a launching pad for me. It was an opportunity for me to grow and develop as a leader. It was an opportunity for me to work with incoming students who were in the same boat as me. It was an opportunity for me to establish myself on the SU campus and set a standard for the rest of my college career.

As my years at Syracuse continued, I knew that I could not leave this program in my past. Instead, I had to take it and make it my present and my future as well. For the past three years I have planned, led and executed the FreshFest program. FreshFest is currently the largest pre-orientation program on the Syracuse University campus, with over 100 incoming

freshmen and transfer student participants and over 35 upperclassmen facilitators. FreshFest has transformed from a program that merely welcomes students to campus to a program that engages students in various capacities and transforms their college experiences.

FreshFest encompasses a wide variety of activities and programs in order to best cater to each student. The program commences with an entire day dedicated to assisting students and their families with the process of moving into the dorms. Students come to Hillel to check-in and fully register for the program, receive a complementary welcome package and t-shirt, meet the Hillel staff and our student volunteers as well as obtain their early move-in pass, which enables them to move into their assigned dormitory before other students on campus are allowed. Upon their arrival at the dorm a FreshFest facilitator, whose sole responsibility for the day is to ensure that the move-in process is smooth and easy and to assist them anyway they can, greets the student and his/her family.

The program continues the following morning with brunch for the students and parents, which gives families the opportunity to say goodbye before parents leave the SU campus. They have the opportunity to meet with the Hillel Executive Director, Lowell Lustig, as well as Hillel staff members and some facilitators to answer any questions they may have about Hillel, life at SU, or anything else they may wish to address. Immediately thereafter we move right into programming with the participants including icebreaker and

team building activities to get to know one another, campus tours to get better acquainted with SU, and a community service project to demonstrate Hillel's dedication to helping others in the community. Later that day we have a barbeque in the Hillel parking lot followed by an off-campus social activity which has varied in past years from bowling to a Syracuse Chiefs baseball game.

The last day of the program concludes with an involvement fair, that enables students to learn about different activities, clubs and programs on campus. Incoming students are able to ask questions and visit stations of interest to them and learn a little bit about the activity. We continue on to a trip up to Skaneateles, NY, where we have lunch on the lake at the beautiful home of Corrine Smith, former dean of the School of Education as well as current Hillel Board of Governor's member. From there we cruise the lake on our traditional boat ride, which has been one of the highlights of the program since its start. The entire program concludes with an Interfaith Dinner, typically held at the Winnick Hillel Center for Jewish Living. This dinner is open to all pre-orientation programs and includes students of all different backgrounds, faiths and religions and is sponsored by Hendricks Chapel.

Though the actual program of FreshFest concludes there, our programming does not stop. We work tirelessly to ensure that our students are continuously engaged and know that they have a place to go for the rest of their college careers. With peer mentor programs, FreshFest reunions and

freshman councils, our participants have many opportunities to get involved with Hillel and continue their involvement in the program that got them excited about SU.

FreshFest is truly a remarkable program and I am thrilled to be able to incorporate it into my honors experience and to use it as the topic of choice for my Honors Capstone Project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank several important people who not only assisted me with my Capstone Project, but who also guided, motivated and constantly encouraged me throughout my college career. Without the support of these individuals, I would not be who I am today.

Shelby Baskin, Hillel Engagement Associate

Dr. Shannon Bowen, Associate Professor/Honors Reader

Professor Robert Kucharavy, Professor of Practice, PR/Advisor

Lowell Lustig, Hillel Executive Director

Brian Small, Hillel Coordinator of Programming

Michael Weiss, President Hillel Jewish Student Union

Renee Crown Honors Program Faculty & Staff

I would also like to thank one individual in particular who has always pushed me to be the best person I can be and who has always taught me that you can always achieve your dreams, my mother, Debbie Hellman.

ADVICE FOR FUTURE HONORS STUDENTS

There are a few tips I would like to give future honors students before they embark on the Capstone Project journey:

- **Choose something you are passionate about.** This project is time consuming, challenging, tedious and will surely consume most of your senior year. Pick a topic you love. Choose something you know you will enjoy researching and working on. The less you enjoy it, the less fun you will have with it.
- **Stick to the timeline.** It is there to help you, not frighten you. Do not worry if you fall behind or lose track of time – refocus and create a new timeline for yourself that you know you can adhere to.
- **Use your advisor as much as you can.** You chose them for a reason. Your advisor is someone you can trust and confide in – do not forget

that. They believe in you and know how hard you are working...do not lose sight of that.

- **Have fun!** Yes, this was without a doubt one of the greatest challenges I had in college. I changed my topic more times than I can count. But at the end of the day, remember that you chose your topic for a reason and while the project itself may prove to be a challenge, do not forget to enjoy yourself.

HISTORY

Hillel at Syracuse University came to campus 59 years ago in September 1950. The organization was small, with 10-15 students on a regular basis, and was located in the basement of Hendricks Chapel. Programs were limited to occasional *Shabbat* services and dinners as well as High Holiday programs. Over the next few decades the program grew to incorporate social activities and community service opportunities for students of all ages and faiths.

In 1950, a Jewish Chaplain was also appointed by Hendricks Chapel, which enabled Jewish students to feel a true presence on the SU campus. Shortly thereafter the first Executive Director of Hillel was appointed, after which the program truly took form. After some time on campus, Jewish

students realized that the small office they had been using in the basement of Hendricks Chapel was not a conducive space to grow and develop the Hillel program in the way they had envisioned. In January, 2001, Lowell H. Lustig, initiated the campaign to raise necessary funds to construct an actual Hillel building on campus, in which students could not only have a spiritual environment, but also a space where Jewish students could take comfort in a close knit community, meet other Jewish students and truly mature as a program. After three years, a tremendous amount of work and a substantial amount of money, Hillel hired a contractor and underwent construction to build the Winnick Hillel Center for Jewish Living, named in honor of the generosity of Gary and Karen Winnick.

After the dedication of the building, Hillel truly established itself as a strong and unforgettable presence on campus, creating large-scale social events, engagement opportunities for all students and religious and spiritual programs for Jewish students to explore their faith freely. While Hillel was flourishing on the SU campus, something was missing. There was a general concern that freshmen and other incoming students were not being properly engaged from the beginning of their college career. Stephanie Spector, SU '08 and former Hillel programming vice-president said, "There was no way for students to get to Hillel unless they found it by themselves." Spector recalls that she found Hillel when she was walking around campus and had to use the restroom. "Had I not walked into Hillel to use the bathroom, there is a

good possibility I would not have gotten involved at all,” Spector said (S. Spector, personal communication, January 27, 2010). It then became apparent that if Hillel wanted to reach out to as many students as possible they would have to do it at the very beginning of the year and start with the incoming freshmen.

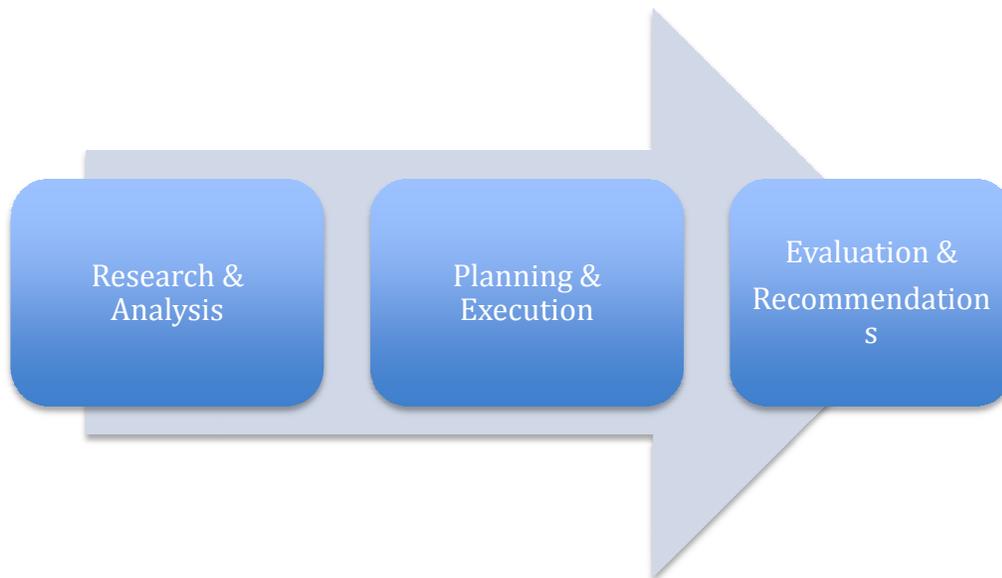
FreshFest began just five years ago in 2005 when Marcy Miller, former Hillel director of student programming, realized the necessity for a Jewish pre-orientation program. With little publicity, funds and knowledge of a pre-orientation program structure, FreshFest had just 35 students, no upperclassmen facilitators and two staff members. The program lasted 48 hours and included campus tours, icebreakers, and volunteer/community services opportunities.

The following year, when planning the program, Miller thought it would be a great experience for the previous participants of FreshFest to staff and serve as mentors for the upcoming program in order to develop leadership skills and to help the new incoming students have a smooth and easy transition from high school to college (M. Miller, personal communication, February 12, 2010). The following year, FreshFest had 70 participants and 20 upperclassmen facilitators. The program expanded to include an additional day for early move-in to campus dorms, as well as an off-campus activity to show students that Syracuse extends far beyond the SU campus and encompasses a rich history and culture.

Since then, the program has grown significantly (Appendix A). It has taken great steps in different directions and has truly expanded as a program in various capacities. With more funding, greater publicity tactics, and tremendous enthusiasm, FreshFest has grown into the largest pre-orientation program on the Syracuse University campus. Although the program varies in numbers, programming and experiences each year, students greatly appreciate having had the opportunity to participate in the program.

PHASES OF FRESHFEST

Although planning a program for new students may not seem daunting, the amount of work, time and effort that goes into planning a pre-orientation program can be overwhelming. Research, analysis, evaluation, the actual planning itself and the execution of the program are all vital components of FreshFest and require much more work than one might imagine. FreshFest can easily be broken down into three strategic phases:



Phase 1: Research and Analysis

There is a great amount of work and research done prior to the actual planning of FreshFest. This phase involved conducting several surveys, interviews, polls, focus groups, and general interest sessions to gain insight on what some of the pros and cons were of FreshFest in the past. It is important to survey participants and facilitators from years past in order to understand what worked best for the program and what should be changed for future years. Research conducted by Hillel also includes basic demographic information as well as gathering data regarding knowledge of the program.

Phase 2: Planning and Execution

After analyzing the information above, the FreshFest committee, which includes the entire Hillel staff, the Hillel Jewish Student Union board

president and engagement vice president, as well as any additional people that may be deemed appropriate (such as a past planner or board member), used the data gathered to plan the upcoming program. The first step was to develop a plan of action as to how the committee was going to approach the program. By creating an agenda for FreshFest, the committee was able to divide and conquer each task effectively. The next step involved developing promotional tactics to encourage the incoming freshman class to sign up for the program.

There are several additional key components to this phase including facilitator interviews and selection, publicity of the program, planning each individual aspect of the pre-orientation program, as well as preparing and educating all those involved about the specific logistics of the program. Further, the planning involved reaching out to current students to help serve on committees, plan all the activities of the program, coordinate times and locations, plan the menus for each meal, and so forth. Planning also included maintaining open and frequent communication with the staff, facilitators and participants as well as the other key publics involved in the program.

Additionally, a major element of this program that often gets overlooked is the tremendous amount of leadership training. The hours of education sessions, leadership development seminars and team building activities are integral to the success of the program. The skills taught to the facilitators (and the participants, for that matter) are all notable traits taught

by the university and the honors program, as well as from other key organizations on campus and across the country. Lastly, of course, comes the execution of the actual program itself, which traditionally takes place one week before classes start.

Phase 3: Evaluation and Recommendations

While some may deem this phase unnecessary, it is perhaps the most important part of the program. Without evaluating the two phases prior, the FreshFest committee lacks the ability to make improvements for the future and to understand the successes and failures of the program prior. This phase also allows Hillel to make key recommendations for the future by reviewing surveys, comment cards, personal interviews, focus groups, direct feedback and responses and so on.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Hillel conducted surveys and personal interviews in order to best understand the successes and failures of the programs in years past. The information reported in this section are results of survey put forth by Hillel

and directed toward the facilitators and the participants from FreshFest 2009.

FreshFest Participant Information

Since the first FreshFest at Syracuse University, the program has increased in participants from year-to-year (Appendix A).

YEAR	# OF PARTICIPANTS
2005	35
2006	70
2007	64
2008	74
2009	104

The overall 197 percent increase from 2005 to 2009 was a direct result of promotional tactics including increased awareness at Syracuse University Spring Reception events, personal recommendations from friends and acquaintances as well as references from the SU Office of Admissions and the Office of Orientation Services (Appendix B).

The distribution of information has varied since the start of FreshFest. For example, in 2008, roughly 31 percent of participants heard about FreshFest from a campus visit, while in 2009 only five percent of participants heard about the program from that specific avenue. The most drastic increase as a result of publicity tactics was in 2009, in which thirty-six participants learned about FreshFest at a Spring Reception, which proved to be the greatest strategy to disseminate information (Appendix B).

Further, when conducting research the FreshFest committee wanted to understand the basic demographic information of the participants to see which geographic locations were being targeted and if there were areas in which improvement could be made in terms of outreach techniques. Survey results demonstrate that since 2008, the majority of FreshFest participants have been from the East Coast, particularly New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania (Appendix C). In 2009, the program expanded to include more participants from other area around the country, such as the Midwest, including Illinois and Ohio, as well as the South, including Florida and Texas (Appendix C). Lastly, in 2009 FreshFest reached a new demographic expansion, which included three international students from Israel, something FreshFest has never accomplished previously.

One of the program's greatest resources happens to be the relationship Hillel has maintained Hendricks Chapel. Not only has Hillel worked directly with the staff of Hendricks Chapel, but they have also provided the FreshFest committee with the names of students who indicated their religious preference as Jewish on their application to Syracuse University. In 2008, only 15 students who identified as Jewish enrolled in FreshFest, while in 2009 that number escalated to 48 identified students (Appendix D). This demographic has allowed the committee to understand the urgency to target Jewish students to participate in a pre-orientation program offered by the largest Jewish organization on campus.

FreshFest Facilitator Information

The facilitator program has truly grown since the first FreshFest in 2005 (Appendix E).

YEAR	# OF FACILITATORS
2005	0
2006	20
2007	30
2008	44
2009	35

Although the number of facilitators has varied from year to year, the facilitators program has remained a key element of FreshFest. In 2008, there was a spike in the number of facilitators and, as part of the program the committee decided that no facilitator applicant would be rejected from the program. As a result, the facilitator to participant ratio in 2008 was approximately 1:2 and although that may work out strategically for other programs, it simply was too many facilitators for the amount of participants that year.

In 2009, the application and interview process was instituted and while an overwhelming 65 applications were received, only 35 were accepted, hence the decrease in facilitators from 2008 to 2009, with an approximate 1:3 facilitator to participant ratio. Although this does not seem much different than the previous year, the change was truly remarkable and

allowed for a greater emphasis on the participants rather than the abundant amount of facilitators.

PLANNING AND EXECUTION

In order to ensure the success of the program, it was vital that the committee made sure each aspect was planned the best it could be. This portion of the Capstone will examine several components of the program and take an in depth look at how they contributed to the overall success of FreshFest.

Facilitator Application/Interview Process

In 2009, the FreshFest committee looked at several different options as to how to conduct the facilitator portion of the program. Based on the information gathered from the research phase, the committee found it necessary to interview candidates and make cuts, instead of simply accepting each applicant. The committee found that it added to the quality of the program by selecting the ideal students to be facilitators instead of accepting unselectively as it had in years past.

Facilitator applications (Appendix I) were disseminated to students of all different backgrounds and involvement levels at Hillel. Applications were dispersed through as many different avenues as possible in order for students to best hear about the program: Facebook, E-mail, personal phone calls, and the application was available on the SU Hillel website. While in

years past the number of applications had remained at a consistent number, in 2009 the number of applicants increased from 30-35 to 65 applicants total. The committee was now in a position in which they not only had to pick the best of the best, but they also had to reject a significant amount of people, something that they had not done before and presented a the possibility that students would be uninterested in any sort of involvement with Hillel in the future.

Each applicant was interviewed by a member of the FreshFest committee and included questions such as, "What do you feel you can contribute to the FreshFest program this year?" and "Please explain what you feel is your biggest strength and your biggest weakness." The committee wanted applicants to have the opportunity to show why they were qualified and what would make them stand out amongst their competitors (Appendix J).

After conducting each interview, the committee met to review notes, compare and contrast answers and make the final selection as to who would be a facilitator for FreshFest 2009. Going into the meeting, it was necessary to set a goal as to how many participants to anticipate so there would be an appropriate balance of participants to facilitators; if there were too many facilitators then the participants would feel overwhelmed or they may not have the opportunity to engage with as many upperclassman as they had hoped.

The committee decided to aim to have at least 100 participants attend the program, a number of participants that had never been achieved before. This estimation enabled the committee to determine that 30-35 upperclassman facilitators would provide an appropriate ratio of participants to facilitators. At the conclusion of the meeting, the committee had narrowed the original 65 applicants to just 35 facilitators, all of which proved to be extraordinary leaders and would help to make the best possible experience for the incoming students.

Leadership

Although a certain level of leadership is expected from all accepted facilitators, the committee also hoped to instill leadership skills within each facilitator so they too would be able to take something away from FreshFest. A major aspect of the program that is often overlooked is the leadership development emphasis for the facilitators. The hours of training, education and team building exercises proved to be integral to the success of the program. The skills taught to the facilitators were all notable traits promoted by key organizations on campus and across the country.

Promotion

The promotion of FreshFest was, essentially, a public relations strategy. If this portion of the program failed, there was a great possibility that the entire program could fail. For example, improper promotional tactics could have led to little interest in the program, which would have led to low

numbers and registration of applicants. The committee decided to take on several different types of promotional strategies to reach students in as many different ways possible and essentially to develop a public relations campaign to accomplish the goal of having at least 100 participants. Syracuse University Spring Reception events were the launch of the promotional campaign for FreshFest. By creating an informative slideshow, brochures, real-life accounts and other tactics, the committee was able to persuade parents and students to sign up for FreshFest. Furthermore, never before seen efforts were used, such as direct communication with incoming students and their parents, promotional letters and personal anecdotes, mass emails and Facebook communication, as well as promotional assistance from the university.

- **Spring Receptions:** Syracuse University provided wonderful Spring Receptions for accepted students and their families to come and tour the school, learn more about activities offered on campus, visit dormitories on campus, and more. According to the Syracuse University website,

“Spring Receptions allow you to discover the exciting traditions and history that make Syracuse University a special place to spend your college years. This full day event provides the opportunity to meet with current students, learn more about your academic program through staff and

faculty from your college of admission, explore the campus, and meet with representatives from many of the offices and student organizations at SU” (“Events for admitted students,” 2010).

One of the most unique parts of the Spring Reception schedule was the opportunity for students to travel around the Carrier Dome to look at different organizations on campus, explore different opportunities, and truly get a feel for what life is like at SU. At each reception, Hillel Jewish Student Union had a table in which students and their families are shown all of the activities offered, the different ways to get involved and most importantly, FreshFest. Each year the committee tries to capture the attention of every student who walks past our table with:

- Brochures
- Information cards
- Paraphernalia
- Pictures and posters
- Video montages

Another key feature of the Spring Reception is the FreshFest facilitators. As part of the requirement, each facilitator is expected to participate in at least one Spring Reception and engage with students to answer any questions they may have, talk to them about life at SU and most importantly, to promote FreshFest. Based on the research provided in the previous section, Spring Receptions have proven to be

one the most successful means of promoting FreshFest, as a handful of students heard about the program from these events.

- **Internet:** Several different Internet mediums are used to promote FreshFest. The Hillel at Syracuse University website is used not only to promote the program, but to also include student testimonials and the participant application itself, so incoming students could read about the program and then actually sign up right then and there. FreshFest was also listed on the Syracuse University Orientation website (orientation.syr.edu/preorientation) along with the other pre-orientation programs offered by the university. This website enabled students to compare and contrast the different programs available and to choose which they felt was most appropriate for them.
- **Print Advertisements:** In addition to the Internet publicity, the committee felt it necessary to reach students on a different level as well. They looked to create a FreshFest promotional brochure for students and their parents to read through to gain a better understanding of the program and all that it offers (Appendix L). This included dates, details, programming information and contact information should they wish to sign up or ask further questions.
- **Parent Contact:** The committee realized that an important part of the college decision process included the parents of the students. Parents

were perhaps one of the greatest resources when promoting FreshFest. One of the goals of the promotional campaign was to ensure that not only were the incoming students excited about coming to Syracuse University, but also that the parents were equally as enthusiastic – the committee aimed to please both the students and their parents. Pitching FreshFest to the parents of incoming students was one of the best publicity strategies used. The committee worked tirelessly to guarantee that the parents were comfortable leaving their students in the care of the facilitators. The FreshFest committee took great pride in reaching two different key publics in order to ensure the success of the program.

- **Jewish Students:** FreshFest has never been limited to Jewish students, but being a Jewish organization/program, Hillel did attract a great amount of Jewish students. SU Hillel worked directly with Hendricks Chapel to obtain a list of self-identified Jewish students based on their initial applications to the University. After acquiring this list of students (which can range anywhere from 100 students to over 300 depending on the year), the committee used it to make personal contact with each individual student who identified as a Jewish applicant. By sending personalized e-mails, letters and making phone calls, the committee attempted to reach out to those Jewish students to let them know not only about FreshFest, but also about

the other amazing opportunities offered at Hillel. This reaching out proved to be one of the greatest strategies used when promoting FreshFest because of the direct connections the committee and facilitators were able to make with students.

- **Word of Mouth:** Though it may not seem like a strong strategy, word of mouth has proven to be a wildly successful promotion tactic. Both participants and facilitators have been some of the best resources to help promote the program. The committee relied heavily on the real-life accounts of those students to entice prospective students and encourage them to participate in FreshFest.

Planning

The planning process of any pre-orientation program requires, time, patience and creative thinking. FreshFest was no different. Under the guidance and supervision of Lowell Lustig, Executive Director of Hillel at Syracuse University, Brian Small, Hillel Coordinator of Programming, and Shelby Baskin, Hillel Engagement Associate, the FreshFest committee was able to plan exciting and unique programs for both participants and facilitators. When looking at the successes and failures of FreshFest, the committee examined each individual activity to assess what role it played in

the overall program. Activities ranged from icebreakers to social events and informational sessions to community service activities.

- **Move-In Day:** The FreshFest committee understood that one of the most appealing parts about this pre-orientation program is the opportunity for students to move into their dorm rooms earlier than the rest of campus. The main goal of this portion of the program was to make this day as easy for parents and their students as possible. After students arrived at Hillel to check in, received their welcome package and other important information, FreshFest facilitators were strategically placed at dorms around campus, as they waited for students to assist them with the move-in process, as well as to answer any questions parents and participants might have had. The day was long and grueling, but it also proved to be one of the most successful and appreciated parts of FreshFest every year.
- **Icebreakers:** Year to year the FreshFest committee has looked to plan fun and exciting activities that allowed the participants and facilitators alike to get to know one another better and to initiate friendships. The committee realized that depending on the size of the program, students were either more likely or less likely to be able to meet a large amount of students. In 2009, participants were divided into smaller groups so that they had a better opportunity to meet student on a more intimate level. Icebreaker activities included name

games, fun fact games and team building games, which enabled students to meet more students.

- **Campus Tours:** The committee found it important to provide students with a strong knowledge of buildings and locations on campus prior to the beginning of the academic year. The campus tours were one of the most appreciated parts of FreshFest, as students left the program with a greater confidence that they were familiar with the Syracuse University campus. During the tour, students were able to ask facilitators questions about where their classes were located, where they could eat on campus, and other general inquiries.
- **Community Service:** Hillel Jewish Student Union emphasized the importance of helping others and helping the community at large. Each year at FreshFest, participants have been engaged in a different community service project, ranging from compiling and assembling toiletry bags for the homeless to learning about various opportunities available for students to get involved both on and off campus. The FreshFest committee found the community service component to be a unique part of FreshFest, as it helped to encompass an important aspect of Hillel.
- **Social Activities:** One of the most exciting parts of FreshFest has been when students were off campus and given an opportunity to learn more about the area surrounding the university. One evening during

FreshFest, participants and facilitators were taken to a social activity, which has ranged from bowling and laser tag to going to a Syracuse Sky Chiefs minor league baseball game. FreshFest participants were also privileged to have Dr. Corrine Smith open her home in Skaneateles to our program, where they were able to enjoy a beautiful lunch and boat ride on Lake Skaneateles.

- **Cultural Program:** As part of FreshFest, the committee wanted students to gain a better understanding of what Hillel is and the many opportunities and resources offered. The program is not restricted to Jewish students, but it was also important that students understand and appreciate one of the most important pillars of Hillel and that is the Jewish culture and religion. Each year at least one program has been planned informing students about Israel and its significance to the Jewish people. This program has usually taken a unique and fun form to engage each student and not just the Jewish participants.
- **Involvement Fair:** Syracuse University has hundreds of registered student organizations, all of which appeal to different students and different interests. One of the most unique parts of the program was the diverse group of facilitators and students. Each year, facilitators are asked to speak to students about activities that they have been involved in on campus, ranging from Greek life to multicultural organizations to intramural sports; the committee tried to cover as

many organizations as possible so students could gain some information about activities they may be interested in joining once the school year begins.

EVALUATION

When assessing FreshFest there were several different approaches the committee chose in order to best understand the successes and failures of the program.

Promotion

In 2009, more so than in years past, an important part of the evaluation process for the committee was to look at the publicity techniques and promotional methods used in order to reach as many students as possible. The FreshFest committee took it upon themselves to ensure that there were various types of promotional materials used and that they were creative in their approach to promoting FreshFest.

As previously mentioned, one of the greatest promotional tactics used this past year was Hillel's presence at Syracuse University Spring Receptions. Not only was the Hillel table enticing and aesthetically pleasing, but FreshFest facilitators were also used as promoters of the program. As seen in Appendix B, the majority of the participants learned about FreshFest at a Syracuse University Spring Reception, which spoke volumes about the effectiveness of Hillel's presence at Spring Receptions and the importance of continuing the promotion of FreshFest at this venue.

Additionally, the committee placed a great emphasis on the simple promotion technique of word-of-mouth. Again, though this may seem obvious, the real-life-accounts of students who were involved in FreshFest, either as a participant or as a facilitator, left a lasting impression on parents and potential participants and further reinforced the significance of this program.

Retention

Naturally when assessing FreshFest, the committee wanted to assess the retention rate of students who participated in FreshFest and their ongoing involvement in other activities offered by Hillel. According to the results of a survey conducted for FreshFest facilitators, in 2009, 85 percent of facilitators participated in FreshFest as an incoming student (Appendix F). Although this value only represented one group of students, it demonstrated a retention rate that was significant to evaluation of the FreshFest program.

Retention of FreshFest participants played an important role in the success of other programs offered by Hillel. Taglit-Birthright is a 10-day free trip to Israel for Jewish young adults ages 18 to 26 who have never participated on an organized program previously (“Taglit-Birthright Israel: About Us,” 2009). According to Hillel surveys, 68 FreshFest participants expressed interest in going on the Taglit-Birthright trip with Hillel at Syracuse University (Appendix G).

Further in 2009, 74 students indicated that they were interested in participating in Hillel’s Alternative Break (Appendix H),

“Hillel's New Orleans Alternative Break is an immersive experience in which a group of students travel to the Gulf Coast to participate in *tzedek* (social justice) work. The trip is seven days long and includes five days of physical volunteer work, nightly programming, interactive discussions, and Shabbat observance. We call it Alternative Spring Break (or ASB) for

short. The trip focuses on the New Orleans community after the events of Hurricane Katrina” (“Hillel’s alternative break,” 2009).

The expressed interest in these two programs allowed the committee to follow up with FreshFest participants and to encourage them to apply and participate in these programs. These statistics are crucial to the promotion and success of the supplemental programs Hillel has provided throughout the course of the academic year.

Another way the committee measured retention was the involvement participants have had with the Hillel Jewish Student Union Board. Each year, students at Syracuse University elect seven members to the Hillel Jewish Student Union Board, which has been responsible for planning and executing the programs that take place at Hillel. Of the members of the 2010 board, five have participated in and/or facilitated FreshFest. The committee took great pride in the ability to inspire students to run for board and continue their involvement in Hillel.

Activities

One of the most valuable forms of evaluation the committee had was the survey results from the FreshFest participants and facilitators, which provided feedback about the individual activities that occurred throughout the duration of FreshFest. During the past year, 68 percent of respondents found the early move-in program to be the best part of FreshFest, while only 13 percent found the Syracuse Chiefs minor league baseball game to be the

least fun aspect of FreshFest, meaning they would have rather seen a different social activity take place (For the results from both our participants and facilitators from this past year, please view Appendix K).

At the beginning of each programming year when the FreshFest committee has met to plan FreshFest, they reviewed the results from the surveys in order to plan the best possible program. Direct feedback from everyone involved in the program allowed the committee to fairly assess each program and discuss what should be included in the FreshFest program again and what needed to be altered or removed from the schedule.

Enhance Hillel's Mission Statement

As previously mentioned in the Abstract, Hillel's Mission Statement is "Creating a diverse, dynamic, and welcoming Jewish community on the Syracuse University Campus" ("Hillel at Syracuse University," 2009). According to Hillel staff member Brian Small, FreshFest goes above and beyond simply fulfilling Hillel's mission statement, "Not only does FreshFest create a diverse, dynamic and welcoming community on the SU campus, the FreshFest program creates meaningful [Jewish] experiences for all participants and facilitators" (B. Small, personal communication, March 10, 2010).

Student Opinions

An important part of the evaluation process is to understand the thoughts and opinions of the students who participate in FreshFest. At the conclusion of the program each year, the FreshFest committee looks to the students to provide substantial feedback, critiques and criticisms to help enhance the quality of the program in the future. This year, the committee aimed to survey students who both participated in FreshFest and who did not to see the overall response to the program.

Rebecca Rosenberg, a junior interior design major from Potomac, MD., says that FreshFest has played an integral part in her college experience, “It was great making friends before classes began and being at school earlier than other students.” Rosenberg said she appreciated the incorporation of Judaism into the program and believed that without FreshFest, she would have not gotten involved in Hillel activities. “Even though my mom forced me to do the program, I don’t regret one minute of it. FreshFest helped me face college head on and gave me a sense of excitement about the four years ahead” (R. Rosenberg, personal communication, March 19, 2010).

Rosenberg’s positive experience with FreshFest as a freshman led her to facilitate the program in 2008 and 2009 and this year she plans to serve on the FreshFest committee.

Non-Participant Opinions

While Rosenberg's experience has proven to be similar to many other Hillel students, there are students who did not participate in FreshFest, and the committee felt it was important to gain their insight as well. Dana Schwartz, a sophomore public relations major from Ocean, NJ., said that while she had considered doing a pre-orientation program, she ultimately chose not to participate in FreshFest her freshman year, "I did not want to leave home a day before I had to. I wanted to spend every last minute with my friends at home and I was never really nervous to make new friends, so a pre-orientation program did not seem logical to me." Although Schwartz did not participate in FreshFest her freshman year, she admits that FreshFest would have added to her college experience. "Doing a pre-orientation program, like getting involved in any club or organization, gives you a step up on everyone. It is a great way to make close friends, get used to campus, and to network. I regret my decision to not attend FreshFest because those students who did attend have a bond that I will never be privy to" (D. Schwartz, personal communication, March 24, 2010).

Student accounts proved that those who participate in FreshFest not only enjoyed themselves, but also found it to be a truly beneficial program to launch their overall college careers. Further, there are students on the

Syracuse University campus who not only knew about the program and did not participate for one reason or another, but who also wished they had participated in some capacity, either as a participant their freshman year or as a facilitator in their remaining years at Syracuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Although I have been planning the FreshFest program for the past three years, it is rather hard to believe that my time at Syracuse University has come to an end and I now must pass the torch on to the next generation to plan this program. I have found that the recommendations we get each year are incredibly beneficial.

FreshFest should continue to develop upon the already successful publicity methods used to reach as many students as possible. If Hillel wants the FreshFest program to continue to grow, then they must continue to develop new techniques for publicity and promotion. FreshFest brochures, flyers, promotional videos, information sessions, etc. are all possibilities for the future, which the FreshFest committee should look to use, however, the committee should also use to look other social media outlets such as Twitter, website promotions, Facebook groups and events and so on. With the recent social media trends it is vital that Hillel remain in touch with incoming students through these avenues as well.

The committee must also look to build upon the program as it already stands. Strategizing to create more fun and unique programming, altering the schedule from year to year and working to incorporate different activities are

important steps that must be taken in order to ensure the success of FreshFest in the future.

Hillel must work to continue to distinguish itself from other programs offered by the University. FreshFest had tremendous success in the past in terms of enrollment and retention as it has surpassed the numbers of other programs offered. However, with rough economic times ahead and a new generation of incoming students, FreshFest risks losing its reputation as an amazing program on the Syracuse University campus. The committee cannot rely solely on the success of the program in the past, but they must also look to the success of the program in the future and recognize the long road ahead.

Below, I have further outlined several recommendations I have for FreshFest and other similar programs.

- **Have a vision.** Before the actual planning of FreshFest, I critically thought about what I wanted to see happen at FreshFest. I knew I wanted a large-scale program that reached out to as many students as possible and would share my enthusiasm and passion for Syracuse University with other incoming students. Without a vision, one enters the planning process blind, which hinders their ability to plan the greatest program possible.
- **Know your limits.** One problem that we continuously faced with FreshFest was our limited space. The planning process was often

challenging at times because our group exceeded 140 people (participants, facilitators and staff) and spaces often could not contain our group. While we experience other limitations as well, it is vital to recognize them and not ignore them. You will not only plan a better program but you will also face problems that may arise in the future.

- **Plan for the students.** This program is not about the facilitators or about the University. This program is not about making money or being recognized as the largest pre-orientation program on campus. FreshFest is about the incoming students. The instant the focus is taken away from the participants the program loses an important element. The entire FreshFest process, from initiation all the way until the very final activity, should be focused on ensuring that the students are participating, making friends and having a great time.
- **Money does not grow on trees.** The first year I planned this program, I did not quite understand the concept of a budget. It is vital to create a budget and stick to it. In such a rough economic period, no one can afford to waste money and creating a prioritized budget is one of the easiest ways to ensure every cent is spent in the best way possible.
- **Don't be afraid to go out of the box.** FreshFest is not a program that mandates the same programs year after year. Planners of this program should not be afraid to be creative and try something new.

I would personally like to see FreshFest continue to grow. While the numbers of the program continue to increase year to year, there are other ways in which the program can expand. It is pertinent that the committee develops and maintains a timeline and adheres to it in order to keep the program as organized and timely as possible.

Perhaps one of the most strategic recommendations I can make for the future of FreshFest is to have a vision for the future. FreshFest has not been and should never be a program that lasts for three days. This means that the committee must look for new ways to engage students after FreshFest ends. By developing strong and creative programs for the actual FreshFest program, the committee has a greater chance of maintaining the active students they had participate in the program. By instilling within them a love for Hillel, Syracuse University, engagement and leadership, Hillel not only helps these students develop an identity at Syracuse, but it will also help Hillel retain strong leaders amongst the students and help them maintain successful program calendars each year. By realizing that FreshFest is more than simply a pre-orientation program, the FreshFest Committee and Hillel as a whole will be able to plan for a strong and bright future.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

- A. Incoming Students Participating in FreshFest
- B. How Students Heard about FreshFest (2008)
- C. How Students Heard about FreshFest (2009)
- D. Geographic Location of Participants (2008 & 2009)
- E. FreshFest Participation Among Identified and Unidentified Students (2009 & 2009)
- F. Number of Facilitators
- G. Facilitators who Previously Participated in FreshFest
- H. Interested in Birthright (2008 & 2009)
- I. Interested in Alternative Spring Break (2008 & 2009)
- J. Letter to Incoming Students
- K. Sample FreshFest Schedule
- L. FreshFest Facilitator Application (2009)
- M. FreshFest Facilitator Interview Sheet (2009)

N. FreshFest Promotional Brochure

SUMMARY OF CAPSTONE PROJECT

Description of the Project

Syracuse University offers a wide variety of pre-orientation programs in order to help students adjust to campus prior to the beginning of academic careers. According to the Syracuse University Pre-Orientation Programs Website, programs offered include

- *FreshFest* sponsored by Hillel at Syracuse University
- *The Leadership Outdoor Orientation Program* sponsored by The Department of Recreation Services
- *Art in Motion: A Public Performance Project* sponsored by Open-Hand Theater, Syracuse Stage, & Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life
- *Taste of the Northside*
- *Build Your First Year Experience* sponsored by Hendricks Chapel

Having participated in a pre-orientation program at the start of my freshman year, I took a special interest in the various opportunities offered and their

impact on Syracuse University students. In addition to my involvement in a pre-orientation program, I have continued to plan and implement FreshFest, Hillel's pre-orientation program, for the past three years. As the point person for this program, I have planned, led and carried out each step of this program from start to finish. In my years of planning, I have helped bring this program from an ordinary pre-orientation program on the Syracuse University campus to the largest pre-orientation program in the history of the University; I initiated the FreshFest facilitator portion of the program, which has not only enabled upperclassmen to take on the role of helping to plan FreshFest, but also to further develop their leadership skills and grow as individuals; I have watched FreshFest transform into a program that truly enhances the college experiences of each participant and facilitator. It is clear that FreshFest means more to me than just any ordinary pre-orientation program.

My involvement and interest in the impact a pre-orientation program can have on students led me to research the successes and failures of FreshFest by closely examining each aspect of the program as well as developing strategic recommendations for the future in order to ensure the program's accomplishment in the future.

This Capstone Project looks at each aspect of the FreshFest pre-orientation program, specifically at FreshFest 2009 compared to FreshFest 2008, in order to understand the successes and failures of the program, look

to provide recommendations for the future and to understand how FreshFest serves as a promotional tactic for Hillel on the Syracuse University campus.

Methods Used

This Capstone uses a wide variety of methods in order to achieve the goal of understanding FreshFest's impact on students and the campus.

- *Surveys*: The FreshFest committee, which consists of the entire Hillel staff, the president and engagement vice president of the Hillel Jewish Student Union Board as well as any other person they may deem appropriate to serve on the committee, took it upon themselves to conduct numerous surveys in order to gain a better understanding of the successes and failures of each aspect of the program, basic demographic information of the participants and facilitators, and to make strategic comparisons between FreshFest 2008 and FreshFest 2009.
- *Personal Interviews*: This project was enhanced by the personal interviews conducted in order to observe the impact FreshFest has on students who have participated in the program as well as the students who chose not to participate. The interviews provided helped to prove the importance of the program and the opportunities it presents to each student.
- *Qualitative Research*: This Capstone relies heavily on qualitative research in order to best understand the strengths and weaknesses of

the program. By examining each aspect of FreshFest in close detail, strategic recommendations were developed in order to ensure the success of the program in the future.

Project's Significance

Some may wonder, “What’s the point of this project?” or “Why should we care about the pre-orientation programs?” This project holds strong personal significance for me. Being a FreshFest prodigy, I know the impact the program has had on me. It helped me gain a stronger knowledge of campus, allowed to me grow and develop as a young adult, as well as to meet other students who were in the same position as me. Had I not participated in FreshFest, I can honestly say I would not have gotten as involved in Hillel as I currently am: I have served on the Hillel board for the past three years, including one term as president, I have participated in numerous Hillel trips and programs, and I have taken a special interest in FreshFest and, as previously mentioned, developed it to be the largest pre-orientation program on the Syracuse University campus. It was no question that my Capstone would involve FreshFest as it has become my true passion.

Perhaps the two most important features of this project are the close examination of each aspect of FreshFest as well as the strategic recommendations for the future of the program. While the program changes from year to year, the significance of the critical assessment of each program

will never change. Without looking at the previous program, how can FreshFest make strides into the future? The breakdown of each program of FreshFest within this Capstone looks at the program from start to finish, allowing us to develop strong recommendations for the future.

The recommendations made in this Capstone provide strong options for the future success of FreshFest. The advice offered will enable the FreshFest committee to plan future FreshFest programs to the best of their ability, building off of the weaknesses of programs prior in order to develop an even stronger FreshFest program for the future. This Capstone not only shows the importance of pre-orientation programs to incoming students, but it also works to ensure the success of FreshFest in the future.