An Evaluation of the School Food Service Workshops of 1990

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by
Lori Szymanski

Thesis Director

Kay L. Chenoweth, R.D.

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When I was first asked to join the efforts in planning two post-educational workshops I had no idea as to the amount of work and planning that was required to make the ten workshop days run smoothly. I first joined the meetings in March when the preliminary plans were being put together. This was the framework into which all the other activities would be juggled around—the planning of the speakers. Every aspect of the workshop had to be considered, how each speaker would flow into the next, what would gain attention, or lose attention quickly and become boring. Of crucial concern was the opening speaker who would set the tone for the entire workshop. After more meetings, the group brainstormed activities which we felt our guests would enjoy and then checked to see if any of these ideas proved feasible. Several more meetings passed before we had a rough outline of the agenda which would be followed for the two weeks; then later even the final outline underwent last minute changes until all the activities were in proper sequence. The planning of the workshop was indeed a challenge which taught the importance of organization.

My main responsibility was to plan and expedite all of the food related events, including two continental breakfasts, two picnic luncheons, and two banquet luncheons. The budget for the workshop was small especially the budget allotment for the breakfasts. I was told that I had only twenty dollars to work with
to prepare breakfast food and beverages for the workshops. My plan of action was to prepare foods which required relatively few ingredients and that could be made in advance and frozen until needed. I chose a very basic muffin recipe which could easily be altered by adding variations, a daisy biscuit recipe for some eye appeal, whimsy on the table, and a whole wheat banana loaf recipe for a more nutritious option. With the help of an assisting student, all the baked goods were made and frozen about a week before the workshops. The beverage to be served was coffee. I wanted to serve fresh fruit at the management workshop because I felt it would be a colorful and nutritious addition to the table.

Since the budget did not allow for any decorating funds I had to use what I could find within the department and needed to use serving dishes to bring festivity to the table. For the first workshop I utilized a rectangular table form which I draped with a lace tablecloth. The center of the table was highlighted with three mirrored cubes. On the center cube was a flower arrangement within a cream colored pitcher. At either side of the center cube was a group of Damask linen lined wicker baskets filled with the assorted baked products. The effect created was of full baskets cascading forward onto the table toward the guest. On the left side of the table was a three-tiered silver service, upon the first two tiers were arranged daisy biscuits while the third layer was layered with fresh fruit skewers. On the right of the table was a silver coffee pot with a mirrored ying-yang at its spout to catch drips and add sparkle to the table. Paper napkins in a fushia
color and paper cups were used so that the guests could take coffee with them into the classroom.

I arrived at the building at five o'clock that morning and prepared the fruit skewers and took care of any additional tasks to be completed for the breakfast. The use of the wicker baskets proved to be very time saving since the baskets could be placed in the microwave to heat the baked products and then taken directly to the service table. As I left that morning the student assistants needed only to turn on the coffee machine and heat and replace the baked goods as needed. While I had been away an unforeseeable problem had arisen, the guests did not want to drink the prepared hot beverage of coffee, but instead wanted a cold drink. This problem occurred because that morning the building air-conditioner had been broken and the building was quite warm, the temperature outside was warm as well. The students improvised by serving ice water which was the only option. Otherwise, this breakfast was executed very smoothly.

The second breakfast was arranged very much like the first. A square table form was used with beverages being served from another area of the room. The change provided for a better flow of traffic and eliminated some of the crowding which I had noticed at the table during the first breakfast. Any left over baked goods were utilized at this time as well as newly baked goods made by the student assistants. Also, orange juice was served instead of fresh fruit, to cut some of the costs. It was served in a punch bowl with cloved, frozen orange rings. I came in at five-thirty that
morning to prepare the set up, which had not been preset and to do other miscellaneous tasks for the breakfast that morning. This breakfast also went very smoothly.

Although both of these breakfasts ran very smoothly, the breakfasts were over the planned budget for several reasons. To begin with, the guests ate over the proposed serving size mostly due to the fact that the table was replenished repeatedly as the products were consumed and because the guests were invited to eat the products at two different times. The idea of the welcome continental breakfast is to greet the guests who have to register with a relaxing cup of coffee and baked product while they wait for the next event of the workshop or wait for registration. It provides a wonderful mingling setting for new guests as well as previous guests who are trying to catch up with old friends. I felt that after the first session, when they were reinvited to enjoy more baked goods and coffee is what proved detrimental. The breakfast should have been dismantled during the first session with perhaps the leftover coffee, being left on a cart for the guests to enjoy. Although it is a very nice idea to reinvite guests to once again help themselves, the twenty dollar breakfast budget cannot be stretched that far. I do not feel that the recipes caused extra budget expense. I planned on preparing recipes which were the least expensive per portion but also added some variety. One solution might have been to limit variety at the breakfast. Although, I chose the muffin recipe for the fact that it could be easily and cheaply modified to give the illusion of abundance, it
did push the guest to try each variety. The budget also went over due to unforseen problems. For example, the whole wheat banana bread was too dry to be enjoyable which meant that it was an item which the budget paid for but which the guests did not eat, an unforseeable waste of budget dollars. The fresh fruit did add a lot of weight to the budget, however I would still argue that it was not a wasted expense. In today’s society people in the food industry are pushing for healthy alternatives even though the cost of such alternatives may be slightly higher. My argument is that at a school which represents people who believe in smart food choices fresh fruit should come before the baked goods in the breakfast budget because it represents to the lay person that smart food choices and enjoyable, elegant food choices can be one in the same.

I began looking for a catering service for the picnic theme luncheons in March. Several factors were to be considered when selecting a proprietor, cost was the most important since the entire workshop was on a strict budget, also nutritional aspects of the food itself and of its preparation and whether delivery times and locations could be met. I contacted several establishments and found that many offered packages that were not within our three-fifty to three-seventy five per person price bracket. When I did find a restaurant with a reasonable estimate, I visited the establishment to try the goods which were in the catering packet. The best package which I found was at a restaurant called the "Rib Cage" for three-fifty a person they provided a two piece chicken
lunch which included two sides, beverages and all needed paper goods. I set up a contract for the first workshop with an option to also have the second workshop catered, dependent on the service and quality of the first workshop. For this first picnic the dessert of strawberry shortcake was made a day in advance. There were no problems in preparing this product or in the set-up and service of this product. The first picnic was carefully planned and was executed without a hitch. By the second luncheon, the workshops were already over budget and quickly problems arose. Since the contract with the "Rib Cage" was for the first week there had been no set price for our second luncheon, for the restaurant to give me a price meant agreeing to a contract and I wanted the option of changing the caterer for the second week. By the time of the second workshop a different owner was taking over the catering activities of the establishment. The previous owner had been willing to work within my budget constraints to make a contract. The new person was not flexible in working within a budget and quoted a ridiculously high priced package.

After contemplating many ideas it proved most cost effective for two workshop staff to prepare the luncheon within the facility. It was admirable that these workers were willing to put a lot of work and effort into the preparation of the meal. Yet, honestly, I felt their efforts were a poor representation of the skills which are carefully honed at this University. I am very interested in and critical of the display of food. It forms one of the first impressions of the diner about his meal, therefore, it cannot be
ignored. In this lunch I feel the aspect of eye appeal was completely ignored. For example, food was served in stainless steel preparation bowls and preparation pans when chafing dishes were readily available. Granted, this event was to be a very casual picnic like setting, it was still being served to guests at the University as a representation of the foods department. My main argument is that the same price was paid for each luncheon although the same quality luncheon was not served. It was painfully obvious that the second luncheon was made within the facility, simply by the manner in which it was served.

Although my responsibility in the second luncheon had been delegated to someone else, if in charge I would have planned this entire event differently. Ideally, I would have changed the entire form of the event from that of a picnic to that of a relaxing lunch, since the entire point of the activity was to let the guests relax together and share similar experiences. This event would have been held in Simpson lounge during later lunch hours (twelve-thirty) using a buffet service setting. A enjoyable, provencial dish such as vegetable lasagna or mostacholli would have been the entree and would have been served with a simple salad adorned with a light vinegretta dressing and warm bread. It could have been served easily using chafing dishes and the women after being served the first time, for portion control, could have helped themselves the remainder of the lunch period. I would have provided two beverage choices, either iced tea or coffee, and if the guest chose another beverage choice he could provide it for himself. For
dessert I would have served a refreshing, homemade, lemon ice and if the budget would have allowed, either piroettes or store bought gingersnaps. I would have used china, silver and glassware to cut down on the cost of paper goods. The only paper goods which I would have used would have been paper cups for the ice so that the guests could take it to the next session and paper napkins. It would have been worth the labor to cut paper costs, especially since there was enough labor and dishwashers. I would have placed tables in Simpson lounge and would have pulled additional tables into the unused hallway so that the atmosphere was cafe-like, the guests would have been in close proximity to one another but they would not feel squashed and close in the room. Since both of the workshops had a reasonable number of guests, I honestly believe that my luncheon ideas could have been done very tastefully within the budget. In truth, I feel that our guests would have enjoyed this experience more since it was obvious from the food left, especially from the second picnic, that a better luncheon plan must exist. My plans are much more labor intensive, yet, if labor hours were carefully planned in advance there would have been no problems especially since for this workshop there was an abundance of labor—four students assisting instead of the two used in previous years.

I do feel that with the increase in the prices which were quoted to me that in the future perhaps one lunch event be catered and the other made in the facility to stay within the budget. Certainly the students assisting in the workshops should be capable
and qualified to arrange such an event. Another constructive idea would be not to cater or prepare the lunches but work into the agenda moving to a restaurant to continue the activities. For example, it could be part of the planned agenda that after the instructor explains problem solving and groups are made that each group will head over to Flying Tomato to have lunch and work on its case study. By contacting the restaurant the schedule could plan for a late lunch when the restaurant was relatively empty and a specific area could be reserved. Using this plan the women would be together to share and work on the case studies but the planner would have less responsibilities. It could be made into a flexible activity which could easily be altered if a rain day occurred by having one or two quick change lectures which to flip around. The women might enjoy a short walk to the village to get away from the classroom. Broad time frames could be assigned during this activity so that people could relax and not be worried with where they need to be next. This idea would work especially well with the case studies since the activity really opened the women up to share their past experiences and differing opinions.

Since the banquet lunches were to be prepared and served by University Banqueting and Catering my job was to make all of the necessary contacts for the event to run smoothly. I first contacted the U.B.C. office in April to make contract dates of when the workshops would need their services. Next, I had to contact the student center to make room reservations. Eventually, I had to check on the room plans and then go back and change the
reservations as time blocks in our schedule changed. In early May, my supervisor and I met with a manager at U.B.C. to set an official contract and menu. I had a copy of the menu items prepared within the facility and was very familiar with several of the items but was very unfamiliar with the likes and dislikes of this audience. The U.B.C. manager was much more knowledgeable in this area and could make suggestions for menu ideas which our audience would enjoy. Also, once again we were working within a budget limiting the amount of money which could be spent per person. After having planned the contract, my only other responsibility in this area was to call in a count of how many guests would be attending each of the banquets. From the comments which were voiced to me, I feel that overall the banquets ran smoothly. There were some problems, however, with the temperature of some guests' food and in the fact that one item contracted for was not in the meal. These problems should have been taken to the U.B.C. manager in charge as the problems arose.

I was responsible for the planning of the trip to Minnetrista Cultural Center. Since the focus of this museum was the history of Central Indiana that the guests would find it both informational and enjoyable. I contacted the museum very early in April to set up a tour date and time, and to find out about any fees which would need to be placed within the budget. Later in the month I received a confirmation letter from the museum. I had several problems when dealing with the museum mostly due to the fact that my contact person was not informed about many of topics that I addressed to
her, also, I had the feeling that she was unsure of where to go to find the answers to the questions I was asking. I was forced to call the museum several times to receive answers to my questions. About a week before the workshops began I was forced to change the time of the workshop due to a problem with arranging speakers. Over the phone it took many tries before I could find my contact to change the reservation time. Again, a letter of confirmation was quickly received. I believe that it might have been faster to contact this museum by letter rather than by phone; by stating in a clearly written letter all of my questions perhaps they would have been answered in one letter as opposed to several phone calls.

My one complaint with the museum tour was that the group of guests should have been split into smaller groups and led through the museum, instead of having only one docent. Most of the group had a difficult time listening to what the sole docent was saying and I think it made everyone feel cramped and crowded. I felt that this was an oversight on the part of the museum since it was notified very early about the number of guests which it would be receiving for a tour. I thought the museum tour on the agenda broke up the day and was a very enjoyable activity for the guests, who seemed very interested.

In addition to my main responsibilities, I also performed various odd jobs which needed to be completed. For example, I personalized all of the certificates to be given out at the banquet in caligraphy. I made numerous phone calls to double check a speaker's presentation time or what equipment would be needed.
I tried to contact a first aid speaker through the health department. I put together a poster for the display case and picked up and sorted through materials for the first aid lecture. I assisted casually in the workshop lectures which I was able to attend. I wrote the thank you letters to the speakers at the workshops.

What I learned from organizing these workshops was a myriad of information. I learned that to make a presentation be successful one has to have planned every detail and event scheduled. One has to consider all the problems which could occur in the situation and what possible solutions could be planned ahead of time, in case they are needed. Although planning is essential, what is even more important is the ability to adapt quickly and improvise when an activity does not proceed as schedule. An important aspect of being an authority figure is the ability to delegate. I know that without the assistance of the two student helpers, especially with the breakfasts, my duties would have been at least twice as demanding and would not have been as effective as I had planned.

In retrospect, I could have perhaps delegated more of my responsibilities, although at the time I felt I could handle the work load which I had given myself. I learned that it is not always easy when one is working within a group, especially when one is not the leader of the group. I had to deal with people who dealt with situations differently than myself, and because they were in authority their ideas and methods carried more weight than mine. For example, I am the type of person who jots a few notes
but normally does not write every detail or idea that I have, my superior was this type of person and a few conflicts arose due to differences in methodology.

One of the major criticisms I have for myself about these workshops is that I should have been more aggressive in certain situations even though it would have made the environment tenuous. For example, the second picnic was delegated by my superior from my responsibility to that of the two student helpers. Because of this I felt that I had no authority to tell the student helpers my opinion of what they were doing, although I did casually suggest some alternatives. In retrospect, I see that I should have voiced my opinions from the beginning irregardless of the group conflict that it would have caused. At the time I felt that group harmony was necessary since so many items needed to be completed and since the group had to work together so closely. I would advocate that the next person who is delegated similar responsibilities be allowed to control this area as he sees proper, dealing with problems that arise with the guidance of his superior and not make every activity a group effort in decision making. This would have been even more of a learning experience if I had been given a budget and then had been forced to roll with the punches. My responsibility and authority were undermined by my superior delegating tasks previously assigned to me, to others without even questioning me about my ability to handle the situation. I know that these workshops were much more than an exercise for students to practice managerial duties, but I am certain that my decisions
could have been a proud representation of all that I have learned while at this University. Since I took on the responsibility of this task, I should have the credit of any success or failure. Instead, through the delegation of so many of my responsibilities to others, I was deemed incompetent and quickly grew apathetic.

In conclusion, I can easily understand why a new marketplace has opened up for planners of conventions and meetings. In today's business world the ability to run a successful workshop takes much more than an afternoon of phone calls. Of course, as the members of the meeting grow so do the plans and possible complications. Even today in a world in which the fax and the telephone seem to rule supreme is the concept of human contact, that people need to meet face to face for maximum brain-storming and problem solving.