

Developing Class Consciousness

By Lyn Fiscus

Speakers at national student leadership conferences often ask their audiences to identify themselves by class. When they ask for middle level students, a tentative cheer is heard. Freshmen respond with a little more confidence, and sophomores and juniors are each a little louder. When it's the seniors' turn to identify themselves, inevitably a resounding cheer echoes through the room accompanied by whistles, stomping, and clapping. The enthusiasm with which they respond is markedly different than the underclassmen.

In the course of growing from tentative middle schoolers to confident seniors, students experience many facets of high school life—some positive, some negative. One area that can have a positive impact on large numbers of students is grade-level, or class, activities. Skillfully planned, class activities can be a tool to help create an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership in the school. Students who belong to classes that have a real sense of unity and class pride have a more positive school experience and often do better in school.

Goals of Class Activities

The specific rites and rituals of class activities vary from school to school, although they generally aim to:

- Develop a sense of class unity
- Create a sense of belonging for students in the class
- Increase school spirit and pride
- Represent all factions of the class
- Raise funds for class activities, particularly for the senior year
- Develop leadership abilities in class members
- Work cooperatively with the student government.

Role of the Adviser

Achieving these goals cannot be accomplished without a competent staff member to advise the class. The class adviser accepts the responsibility for working with student leaders to orchestrate all the many class activities each year. The adviser should not be responsible for doing the work itself, but rather for training student leaders so that they can carry out the activities, offering guidance when needed, and serving as a resource.

Working with class officers and other student leaders presents an opportunity for the adviser to teach leadership skills that students will use for life. Planning dances, class trips, fundraisers, spirit contests, and other class activities are often viewed as ends in themselves, but the astute adviser looks at these activities and asks, “What do I want my student leaders to learn from this experience?” Just as in the classroom, class advisers can offer guidance and be a resource to enable students who participate in class activities to learn the skills and attitudes that will make them lifelong learners and productive citizens.

Class Concerns

The focus of class activities will vary depending on the grade level of the students. As freshmen, students form their class unit, perhaps for the first time. If students from more than one middle level school come together in a high school environment, there will be a large number of students who don’t know each other. One of the first tasks of the freshman class adviser is to help the students become acquainted with each other and develop a comfort level with their new environment. Engaging them in class activities right away can help students settle in and begin having a positive high school experience.

Freshman class advisers often work in conjunction with counselors and administrators to develop freshmen orientation programs. Many schools also offer other activities exclusively for freshmen: a barbecue before the first football game, a freshmen recreation night, a “welcome to the high school” event before

school starts. In addition, homecoming activities typically offer an excellent opportunity to involve freshmen in a variety of fun events.

The patterns established in the freshman year will often carry through the rest of high school, so it is especially important that student leaders and the class adviser make an active effort to involve all members of the class. Although you will likely have a small group of very active students, do not let class activities become perceived as something that is closed to all but the “in” group. Encourage student leaders to find ways to involve everyone.

In the sophomore year class efforts begin to focus more on fundraising and leadership development, while continuing to build on the foundation started in the freshman year. It’s a good idea to hold at least one activity to help the sophomores build a greater sense of class unity. Ordering class rings is often a rite of passage that takes place during the sophomore year; some schools organize a Ring Dance around this event. A class service project could also serve to unify the class.

In most schools, each class needs to raise funds to support the activities of the senior year such as class trips, proms, and graduation. The sophomore year is an excellent time to focus on fundraising, as students usually don’t have a very heavy academic load at this point and aren’t preoccupied with other concerns. It’s also a good time to invest in some leadership training for promising student leaders. Don’t limit yourself to just the elected officers; often informal student leaders will benefit from leadership training and will become a larger pool from which to draw when selecting chair people to head up class activities.

In the junior year your investment in leadership development will begin to pay off as students take charge and play an important role in planning class activities. Junior year is typically focused on planning the junior-senior prom, continuing fundraising activities, and taking a leadership role in school spirit activities. A

service project for the school or community is another frequent project for junior classes.

The responsibilities of a class tend to increase as the students enter their senior year. Upperclassmen are often responsible for creating and maintaining school spirit and serving as role models for their younger peers. With graduation looming on the horizon, senior student leaders become focused on planning senior events, culminating in the commencement ceremony.

Role of the Class Officers

Elected by their peers, class officers play a special role in the activities of a class. They are the official organizers, motivators, and energizers and are expected to work with and on behalf of their peers. Their success usually depends on how well they get others involved in class activities.

The best class officer groups function as a leadership team with students in the roles of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Committee chairs can be either elected or selected.

President—this person is the official head of the class. He or she is key in motivating other members and coordinating the efforts of the officer group.

Vice President—the second in command is typically in charge of coordinating the work of the committees.

Secretary—this person keeps records of class activities, whether minutes of meetings, or project files on class events. He or she also handles correspondence, including thank you notes.

Treasurer—he or she maintains financial records for the class and provides periodic updates. This person often assumes the role of chief financial consultant, working with committees to set budgets, securing prices on materials and supplies, and handling all financial affairs for the class.

Committee Chairs—these people coordinate the work of various committees established to perform the work for class activities. Filling committee chairs is an excellent opportunity to involve student leaders who have not been elected to office but who have good leadership skills.

An Integral Part of School Life

There are a variety of other activities that can help a class develop its identity. Many schools select a class song, color, motto, and banner. Determining a gift for the school offers each class a chance to leave a tangible memento of itself behind after graduation. Sometimes these activities are seen as being extra things that interfere with the real business of school: academics. If used properly, they can become an integral part of the life of the school, providing opportunities for leadership development and involvement on the part of all students. The positive environment created by enthusiastic class members will strengthen every aspect of life at your school.

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