

Local Service Initiatives

Name of Initiative: Celebration of Teaching and Learning

Station: Thirteen/WNET and WLIW21 (Educational Broadcasting Corporation)

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Briefly describe the initiative and be as specific as you can be about the products or services that the initiative includes.

The Celebration of Teaching and Learning was a two-day professional development conference designed for 7,000 K-12 educators. Attendees had access to 50 small, hands-on workshops (many featuring public broadcasting content), more than two-dozen top education speakers (including the state commissioners of education for both New York and New Jersey), a massive exhibit hall with more than 100 vendors, appearances by four celebrity guests (Tom Brokaw, Gwen Ifill, Frank McCourt, and Richard Dreyfuss), and three outstanding student performance groups, one of which was profiled on the September 2005 POV program “The Hobart Shakespearians.” While the conference was primarily intended for educators from the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area, it ended up attracting registrations from 35 states, undoubtedly because of its extremely high quality content. The goals of the Celebration were: 1) to provide educators with a powerful professional development experience; 2) to send a major statement to educators that public television is a strong partner both in terms of our content and related classroom materials and in terms of our willingness to host events like this one; 3) and to send a similar message to all of our viewers to remind them that public television has direct involvement in their communities beyond what appears on the screen.

How does this initiative fit into your “portfolio” of other Local Service Initiatives? Is it one of many initiatives and projects, or does it take the bulk of your “Local” resources?

Thirteen/WNET and WLIW21 are chartered by the Board of Regents in New York State, and as such are part of what is called the University of the State of New York – the aggregate of all public entities that receive state support to further the goals of education in the state. At the most basic level, there is the expectation that we will deliver high-quality video content into classrooms, but in recent years we have taken a broader and more robust approach to defining our role in schools. We actively develop relationships with schools in our broadcast area, working primarily with teachers to help them improve their skills in using video and mixed media in their classrooms, but we also align our video content to state mandated curriculum and locally adopted practice. We are, for example, an approved professional development provider for the New York City Department of Education, and we work regularly with the New York State Department of Education, as we currently are doing as a recipient of one of four Ready to Teach grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. The Celebration of Teaching and Learning is an extension of and complement to our total strategy for engaging with our local school communities.

What station assets, competencies and/or relationships does the initiative build upon?

The Celebration of Teaching and Learning builds upon the growing portfolio of work we have developed with schools in our community and with the New York State Department of Education. Within our 28-person Education Department, probably 60-70% of our total effort is directed to this local/statewide education work. (The remaining effort supports the work of our national productions.) It’s important to note, however, that the entire station participated in the Celebration, with departments working together to “produce” this event in the same way they work together to “produce” a major national production. Consequently, attendees at the Celebration got to learn much more about the station writ large through special presentations such as “Meet the Producers”, which was staged in our large exhibit area, and to see taping take place throughout the two-day event. Programs and on-air spots using footage from the Celebration have appeared on both Thirteen and WLIW, making a tangible connection between what we contribute to the community and how we use our air to tell that story. While we have a strong relationship with our local education officials and also in the New York State Education Department and Board of Regents, we always need to find ways to deepen and broaden those relationships, and the Celebration of Teaching and Learning contributed to doing that.

AGC Planning Project, 5/23/2006

How would you describe the community benefit of this work? What needs are being addressed?

Teachers across the country constantly need access to high quality content and ideas of how to use that content in classrooms to improve student learning. This need is not unique to the Metropolitan New York City area, but given that there are 1.1 million children in the New York City Schools alone (with many more in the surrounding area), with a high concentration of poor and immigrant children, the need is especially great here. Also, because of the high cost of doing business in NYC, there has not been an education conference of national quality held here in over a decade. The education community was starving for such an opportunity, and the hundreds of electronic evaluations we received indicated that we provided what they needed. From every quarter, we are hearing a consistent plea to make the Celebration an annual event. It was a serious-minded professional development conference, but it was also a true “celebration,” which gave attendees that inspiration that is essential to their ultimate success. In every way, this live event possessed all of the qualities we associate with the best of our on-air broadcasts.

Who is the “customer?”

The “customers” for the Celebration were educators – teachers, administrators, school board members, PTA members, and education policy makers – working in and concerned about the K-12 school community.

How do you know or measure if the customer’s needs are being met?

We actively distributed paper evaluations and also sent out an electronic evaluation to all attendees. An assessment of those comments reveals an extremely high rate of approval for what we did. We also are drawing important feedback from the education groups who were our partners in creating and executing the Celebration. These are groups like the United Federation of Teachers (representing 70,000 educators in NYC), the New York State United Teachers (with 500,000 members state-wide), the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (with 7,000 members in NYC), the New York State School Boards Association, etc. Again, all of these groups – and additional ones – have already expressed their interest in participating again next year.

Who benefits from the initiative?

The education community – and ultimately, we hope, the children – are the ultimate beneficiaries of this initiative. But Thirteen/WNET and WLIW21 are also beneficiaries. We believe that as public television goes forward amidst an ever crowded media landscape, we need to distinguish ourselves as a true partner with the public, building relationships with our viewers that go beyond the screen. We believe the Celebration will help us strengthen our relationship with the schools and the NY State Department of Education, but we also hope it will help build our membership base, viewing audience, and funder portfolio, all of which help us grow ever more financially stable. Regarding funders, for example, we were able to attract substantial sponsorships for the Celebration from several corporate foundations that had not previously supported the station.

How do you measure the benefits?

As stated above, we will measure the benefits of this initiative against the goals we set for it. It matters that nearly 7,000 educators registered for this event, but it also matters that two weeks after the event the official newspaper for the United Federation of Teachers ran a two-page, center-fold spread with the headline: “Heroes of the Education System: Public Television Honors Teachers at Two-Day Event.” That newspaper is read by more than 70,000 members of the UFT. It matters that as a result of his participation in the Celebration on the Gwen Ifill Forum on International Education, NY State Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills has agreed to host a statewide symposium later this year on the same topic placing our series WIDE ANGLE in a prominent place on the agenda and inviting Thirteen’s VP for Education to be one of the four non-Department members of the planning committee. These are a few education-related measures of how we have benefited from this initiative, but there are also direct financial ones. We already are in discussion with one company that has not previously been an underwriter of our local programming but as a result of being a sponsor of the Celebration has requested from us a proposal for \$300,000. We also are exploring the possibility of creating a new membership category – the Educator Member – which should help us build our membership numbers.

**Describe the financial model for the initiative, being as specific as possible. How much does it cost?
What are the sources and amount of revenue? How does it fit into your station's overall economic model?**

The financial model for this initiative is fairly straightforward but challenging. There are three main sources of revenue for this kind of event: tickets, vendors, and sponsorships. With a first-year event of this size, it is difficult to meet revenue goals because the event has no track record on which to build. Vendors, for example, are reluctant to dedicate financial and human resources to their exhibit space when they have no way of knowing how much potential they have for sales. There is a similar challenge convincing school districts to pay the costs of tickets to such an event when they don't know whether the event will be successful or not. On the other side of the ledger are the costs of producing such an event, which are probably higher in the first year than in subsequent years. In this area, one cannot afford to skimp because in the end the ultimate success will be the result of the experience attendees have. Similarly, in the first year it is highly likely that many mistakes will be made costing additional money, while at the same time some first-year expenditures are made that become investments in the future (signage, for example, that can be reused). So this double-edge sword pretty much ensures that money will be lost in the first year, which was certainly the case with the Celebration. Fortunately, we built this event with a production partner – ENK International – a conference/trade show business. Not only did they help us put on a first-rate event, but they provided valuable information that prepared us for the financial realities. Their experience strongly indicates that successful events quickly become more financially viable after the first year, breaking even in year two, and possibly even making money in future years. Our Board saw the Celebration as an important investment in the company's core mission.

Could other stations use this idea or model? Would it work for any size station or licensee type?

It is entirely possible that other stations – either alone or in a consortium – could create a professional development event like the Celebration of Teaching and Learning. The scale, of course, would have to be appropriate for the market size. (In our market, for example, there are more than 250,000 K-12 educators.) It is also possible that the model works for any licensee type, with some types making it easier than others.)

***Please send this information to Brian Edstrom: bedstrom@tpt.org**