Statewide Conference: Educational Strategies and Student Engagement Institute (ESSEI)

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Funding Sources:

Funding for the Educational Strategies and Student Engagement Institute (ESSEI), a statewide conference held annually in Florida and co-hosted by the Florida Department of Education, includes sponsorships, exhibitors' fees, grant funding, and conference participants' fees.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

Project budget and costs are contingent upon the number of participants and the scope of the event. The conference project budget shown below is based on the 2016 approximated costs for the Educational Strategies and Student Engagement Institute where there were 415 attendees. These costs are for the implementation of the event and do not include the costs of staff travel and hotel accommodations.

PROJECT COST	**$ 76,000**
(2016 ESSEI approximations; 400$^+$ attendees)	

Cost Breakdown:

Hotel Costs	55,100
Conference Insurance	
Food / Beverage	
AV Equipment	
Vendor/Exhibit Display Area	
Credit Card Fees	
Keynote Speakers	4,800
Fees	
Travel & Hotel	
Design / Printing Services	4,600
Program Book Design/Printing	
Conference Signage	
Marketing Flyer Design	
Website Design (CVENT)	
Materials / Supplies	1,500
Bags	
Signage + Printing	
Presenter/Vendor Ribbons	
Award Certificates	
Name Badges	
Printer Supplies	
Misc. Freight	
Misc. Office Supplies	
Administrative Fee	10,000
Website Maintenance/ Hosting;	
Communicating, Scheduling, Negotiating for	
Hotel Logistics, Speakers, Attendees and	

Interested Persons; Arranging Schedule of
Workshop Sessions and Equipment
Placement; Managing and Tracking Payments;
Coordinating Contracts; On-site Trouble-
shooting; Frequent Reporting and Meetings
with Planning Committees.

Project Scope and Setting:
The Educational Strategies and Student Engagement Institute (ESSEI) is generally a 2 ½ day conference held in a hotel in the central Florida area. ESSEI was designed to promote and encourage information-sharing and professional development in student engagement and other strategies to enhance student success through high school graduation and beyond. ESSEI also provides the opportunity for networking and collaboration-building among the educational stakeholders within and surrounding Florida. The theme "Together Ensuring All Students Succeed" exemplifies the intent of ESSEI. Additionally, the 60 plus workshops facilitated by program staff, school teachers, community organizers, and education administrators from national, state and local levels guarantee conference participants an inspired and enlightening experience.

Project Staffing Pattern:
During my tenure as Director of Dropout Prevention for the Florida Department of Education, the ESSEI planning/coordinating committee consisted of 18 representatives from the following entities and departments:

- **Florida Department of Education:** 1) Bureau of Family and Community Outreach including program offices of 21st Century Community Learning Center, Dropout Prevention, Family and Community Engagement; 2) Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Support Services including programs offices of Juvenile Justice Education, School Social Work and ESE Secondary Transition; and 3) Bureau of Federal Education Programs including the program office of Title I Part D and Public School Options
- **School Districts:** 1) Broward County Public Schools; and 2) Orange County Public Schools
- **Florida Associations:** 1) Florida Afterschool Alliance (FASA); and 2) Florida Association of Alternative School Educators (FAASE)

Each representative from the areas listed above served on one or more of the four planning team sub-committees: Marketing, Workshops and Presenters, Sponsors and Exhibitors, and Registration and Evaluations. The sub-committees had two co-leads that facilitated the specific tasks and reported recommendations to the full planning committee for further input.

An Executive Planning Committee, consisting of the Bureau Chief of Family and Community Engagement, the Director of Dropout Prevention, and a hired event coordinator/planner consultant, are tasked with considering recommendations, negotiating terms, and making final decisions. Leadership within the Florida Department of Education is informed of planning progress throughout the project. The sub-committees meet periodically to discuss and determine recommendations that are presented during full planning committee meetings.

Population Served:
The target population for ESSEI consists of school district administrators, classroom teachers, juvenile justice education coordinators, school social workers and psychologist, school counselors and attendance specialists, community-based leaders, faith-based representatives, college administrators, district and school volunteer coordinators, and families. In 2016, ESSEI had a then-record number attendance, approximately 415 attendees representing all targeted populations.

Project Origination:
In the 1990s, the idea of a statewide conference came from a need to gather stakeholders from around the state for the purpose of sharing information and best practices on increasing graduation rates, preventing dropout and enhancing student success. Over the years, the conference name has changed based on the focus; however, dropout prevention has always been the constant and central topic. The primary host and lead planning organization has also consistently been the Florida Department of Education.

Issues Addressed:
Initially the conference was known as the Dropout Prevention Conference. As the need to address related issues and other associated factors became apparent, the focus was expanded to ensure relevance for the intended participants. In 2014, a needs assessment was administered by the planning committee to specific stakeholder groups. As a result, conference content priorities were identified and organized in the following six strands: 1) academic options and alternative pathways, 2) attendance, 3) curriculum and instruction, 4) data to inform action, 5) family and community engagement, and 6) student support services and interventions. Suggested topics for the strands were also identified to solicit workshop presenters for those topics. Each year the planning committee members that represent various areas are encouraged to review the workshop content strands and topics to ensure relevancy to educational stakeholders.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:
As stated in the Florida Commissioner of Education's letter to the 2016 ESSEI participants, the objectives of ESSEI are "to enhance the capacity" of all stakeholders and "work together to keep students in school, graduate them and prepare them for their post-secondary options." The means for capacity-building were "to share and learn from colleagues and professionals on ways to instruct and engage students…" The specific desired outcomes of the 2016 ESSEI were:
   a) Registration of at least 250 individuals,
   b) Representation of various educational stakeholder groups,
   c) High relevance and usefulness of information shared in workshops, special meetings and general sessions,
   d) Increased accessibility to FDOE representatives,
   e) High workshop satisfaction ratings from participants, and
   f) Provisions for networking and collaborative associations that extend beyond the event.

Project Strategies and/or Interventions:
We used several strategies and tools to assist in attaining our desired outcomes and to ensure that our objectives were met. We collaborated with representatives from varying perspectives on

every aspect of the planning and project implementation. We cultivated intentional partnerships with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, as well as collaborations with various departments within the Florida Department of Education including the offices of Dropout Prevention, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Exceptional Student Education, Juvenile Justice Education, Title I Part D (Delinquent and Neglected Students), School Counseling, Social Workers, Family and Community Engagement, Career and Technical Education, Safe Schools and Bullying Prevention, and others.

Constant monitoring of registration was also a strategy used. The reported data influenced our decisions on who to target and the type and intensity of the marketing strategies to use.

We created opportunities for team building during ESSEI by having networking sessions, special meetings of those with similar work responsibilities, and even by selecting a conference venue that offered comfort, sufficient space and aesthetic interest.

To better ensure that we had the most relevant information shared by the most appropriate presenter(s), we used a workshop rating system. The system included the critical evaluation of submitted presentation proposals and the reporting of a list of recommended presenters to the full planning and executive committee meetings for further discussion and consideration. Also, we invited individuals from the FDOE, school districts and other governmental agencies that had certain expertise on specific topics and/or that were implementing a program successfully. We also strategically arranged the flow and timing of workshops with various stakeholder groups in mind and made sure we offered a variety of choices during each concurrent breakout session. Workshop topics that were likely to draw a large interest were repeated during other session times and days.

To seek maximum exposure and participant satisfaction we experimented with the time placement of several events during the 2016 ESSEI. For example, we held a Student Forum during a general session luncheon, facilitated special group meeting prior to the first breakout sessions, hosted a "game-themed" evening networking session, and held afternoon workshops on the last day.

In addition to the written workshop and overall conference evaluations, we captured verbal feedback from conversations with participants. We also received completed feedback sheets from the Student Forum where the audience shared their lessons learned from the students. Additionally, a separate survey was administered to the planning committee members. The compiled results from all forms of evaluations were discussed among the planning committee members during the ESSEI Debriefing meeting that occurred after the event. Examples of feedback from these various assessment tools will be shared in a later section.

Project Timeline:
ESSEI planning and implementation is approximately 10 months long with some months requiring less work than others. For the September 2016 ESSEI, the full planning committee had its first monthly kick-off meeting in January 2016 where sub-committee co-leads and members are confirmed, tasks are reviewed, preliminary decisions shared (conference dates, venue and theme), and "the charge" is given.

The sub-committees meet on their own depending upon their tasks and due dates. For example, the tasks of the marketing sub-committee are most critical earlier on in the process and subside about a month or two before the event. With school district and school personnel among the key stakeholders targeted for ESSEI participation, we were mindful of the better times to market the conference and solicit presentation proposals, working around school testing times and major school breaks. The frequency of the planning and executive committee meetings increased as the event date nears. Immediately after the event, the focus is to closeout tasks, finalize expenses, and prepare and disseminate reports.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Implement the Project:
To properly plan, support, and implement a statewide conference such as ESSEI, it requires the commitment of the state agency leadership, and those on the planning team. At least the primary planners (both at the state agency and hired consultant, if applicable) need to have excellent skills in organizing projects and people, great participatory leadership abilities, knowledge of fiscal operations and budgeting, and effective communication skills. Another critical condition for project implementation is access to up-front funding for deposits that can be leveraged and reimbursed with other revenue streams as registration and exhibitor fees, sponsorships, and other revenues are received later in the process.

Project Outcomes, Results, and Achievements:
We met and in many cases exceeded our intended outcomes and objectives. We exceeded our target registration by 66% where 250 was the target and approximately 415 were in attendance. All intended stakeholder groups were represented. Many offices from the state education agency (FDOE) were on-hand and disseminated relevant and current information in workshops and at exhibit booths. Collaborations with school districts and community representatives were forged. For example, after the scheduled Teen Parent Program workshop, several district and program level staff met informally in the hotel's lounge area to discuss future collaborative meetings for months to come.

The workshop evaluations revealed that at least 90% of respondents felt that their knowledge and skills were increased and the information shared was relevant to their job. Additionally, respondents overwhelmingly reported that they were satisfied with the event and were likely to recommend it to others in the future. A participant's comment does well to sum up what the conference figuratively was and was not: "This conference does not provide a lot of food and fancy stuff like others, but I did get plenty of meat and potatoes to carry back with me."

These examples from the workshop evaluation report are evidence of high participant satisfaction ratings, capacity-building enhancement, and acquisition of additional knowledge. Therefore, our objectives were met!

Relation of Project Outcomes to School Completion, Dropout Prevention and/or Graduation Rates:
It is difficult to ascertain and to measure the relationship of participants attending the conference to school completion, dropout prevention and/or graduation rates directly. However, based on feedback, we do know that relevant information was shared and that key collaborations were formed and enhanced. Also, the majority of participants that submitted an evaluation indicated they would implement newly acquired strategies on dropout prevention, student engagement and

innovative ways to increase student graduation rates in their school districts and community programs. The planning team sincerely hopes that as these stakeholders implement the newly-acquired strategies to engage students and as they continue to collaborate to leverage knowledge and resources that the rate of dropout will decrease.

Current Project Status:
ESSEI has continued to be an annual event co-hosted by the Florida Department of Education and held in central Florida. Planning is currently underway for this year's event.

Role/Involvement in the Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:
In my previous position as Director of Dropout Prevention, my responsibilities included facilitating and coordinating the ESSEI Planning Committee and co-leading two subcommittees. During that time, the committee made significant improvements to the planning and execution of ESSEI. Among my proudest moments were 1) being recognized at the 2016 ESSEI and 2) receiving an evaluation comment that read: "I've come to the dropout conference for many years, but this one [2016] was the best conference I have ever attended!" Although I am no longer the Director of Dropout Prevention, I am pleased to currently serve on the ESSEI Planning Committee as a higher education representative and community advocate.

Lessons Learned from the Project:
Not only did our planning team recognize the need for a robust and varied means for assessing satisfaction and garnering feedback. We also had the foresight to use the feedback for continuous improvement. The following are examples of what we have learned:

- Strategically identify planning team members that represent different areas and are willing to commit their time and talents to the success of the project.
- Engage potential sponsors and exhibitors early to secure their financial support and begin including their company names in marketing material.
- Launch marketing materials including email blasts, flyers, and the website as early as possible before the end of the school year so that schools, school districts, and state agency representatives can include attendance in their budgets.
- Ensure that the topics presented are relevant to the various audiences.
- Recognize the power of all stakeholder groups especially the most key stakeholder, the students! The Student Forum elicited the most favorable comments from attendees.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners regarding the Project:
My advice would be to secure commitments of people to assist throughout the planning of the event. Collaborations and leveraging resources and information is key to the success of the event as well. As we continued through the years of planning, we learned more about the resources available within and outside of our own state agency. Organizing the event became easier due to the structure of the sub-committees, identification of tasks, frequent updates regarding planning and task completion progress, and adherence to timelines with some built-in flexibility. Sub-committees helped individuals to match their skills, strengths and interests to the tasks without overwhelming and over-committing their time. Lastly, obtaining, reviewing and incorporating various forms of feedback and suggestions has remained a critical key to the success and continuous improvement of the Educational Strategies and Student Engagement Institute.