

The Chocolate Rendezvous: A Black-Tie Fundraiser

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Introduction

The lack of adequate teaching materials can be detrimental to student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000 & McCubbins, Anderson, Paulsen, & Wells, 2016). The lack of funding was one of the primary factors leading to the lack of available resources (Saucier, Vincent, & Anderson, 2011). One avenue to address a lack of resources is through fundraising. Ricketts Duncan, Peake, and Uessler (2005) identified fundraising activities as one of the most important competencies necessary in Agricultural Education. Furthermore, fundraising was one of the responsibilities that teachers who left the profession disliked (Walker, Garton, & Kitchel, 2004). One alternative to the traditional forms of fundraising is the Chocolate Rendezvous.

The Chocolate Rendezvous is a fun-filled evening that included over seventy decadent chocolates as well as hand-roasted coffees, spirits, wine and bourbon pairings, heavy hors d'oeuvres and live entertainment. The chocolate treats were donated or discounted by local businesses including: pies, cakes, cookies, cupcakes, bars, macaroons, dipped fruits, fondue fountains, and Culver's Chocolate Rendezvous exclusive concrete mixer. Guests received three drink tickets and had access to a cash bar throughout the evening in addition to the complimentary wines and bourbons at the tasting area. The heavy hors d'oeuvres included farm to table beef sliders, wild caught shrimp, salmon, and an assortment of cheeses and vegetables. The chocolate Rendezvous served as the only fundraiser for the department over the past two years.

How it Works

Guests purchase the \$50 ticket for the Chocolate Rendezvous online or through person-to-person sales. Person-to-person sales are facilitated by the College Foundation, Board of Directors, College Leadership, and Honorary Chairs. Honorary Chairs consist of community leaders who are asked to sell 12 tickets to the event. All person-to-person sales may also purchase tickets online, and note the person who referred them to the event, to avoid any inconveniences of exchanging funds for tickets. This fundraising event is unique in that there is no solicitation of funds at the event, nor any spoken program. Guests enjoy not having to bid on gift baskets/silent auctions, participate in dessert dashes, purchase raffle tickets, nor listen to any stuffy program speakers.

The event is an elegant black tie evening where people can gather, listen to live music, dine on exquisite food, and enjoy premium spirits. Food is catered through a high-end local restaurant. Desserts are acquired through local, regional, and statewide confectioners. Most confectioners donate or provide a discount for the desserts. Each dessert includes an information card with the confectioner's logo, name of the dessert, and a creative description. Confectioners are asked to deliver and set up their desserts the afternoon of the event. Employee volunteers are asked to help serve the confections the evening of the event. The doors open at 6:00 pm, where guests can dine on the hors d'oeuvres and enjoy the bar; the dessert buffet does not open until 7:00 pm to allow for an impressive view of over 70 desserts. The event's social media pages are tagged by guests to show off the impressive array of decadent desserts. In addition to the aforementioned desserts, Culver's creates a concrete mixer specifically for the event. Known as Culver's Chocolate Rendezvous Concrete mixer, this specialty dessert is created and served at this once-a-year event. Hand roasted coffee is also served by a local barista. The hand-roasted

coffee is slow poured into individual cups for guests to enjoy. Live entertainment for the event is twofold. Based on feedback from the first year, there is a background-vocal entertainment on the first floor of the event near the food, desserts, and bar. Here guests can network and mingle while listening to soft music. The second-floor entertainment is also located near a bar and wine/bourbon tastings. However, the second-floor entertainment is louder and more robust. Guests can dance and sing along. We added a professional photo shoot on the “red carpet” for the second annual event; guests received a complimentary 5x7 photo at the end of the event.

Results to Date

The inaugural Chocolate Rendezvous was held in February 2018, 425 tickets were sold at \$50 apiece. The net profit from the event yielded approximately \$15,000. The department used those funds for a variety of projects throughout 2018. The funds helped to provide an operating loan for students to run the departments’ student-ran farm. The operating loan was repaid at the end of harvest. The funds were used to purchase three Garden Tower hydroponics units for our students to learn more about hydroponics. The department added a small chicken flock, a chicken coop and animal husbandry equipment with a portion of the funds. We also used some of the funds to encourage our students to participate in a variety of professional development opportunities throughout the year. A portion of the funds were also used for marketing, which included paying for a recruiting booth at the [STATE] FFA convention, [STATE] Agricultural Education Teachers Conference, and other recruitment activities throughout the state. The funds also purchased promotional materials such as recruitment booth chairs, department logo pens, and other giveaways.

The second annual Chocolate Rendezvous was held in February 2019; over 600 tickets were sold, yielding approximately \$20,000 in profit. We plan to use a portion of the proceeds to support the operating loan for the student-ran farm again this year. We are also planning to use a portion of the proceeds to support departmental recruiting and marketing initiatives. The department is in the process of securing a greenhouse that is being donated from a local horticulture business. We believe that a majority of the funds raised this year will be used to relocate and upgrade the greenhouse for our students to use in the Fall of 2019.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans include expanding the event to 750 guests, in doing so we are adding a third room to meet fire code. The third room will include canned music played at low volumes to provide an intimate atmosphere where guests can converse. We highly recommend enlisting a group of honorary chairs to help promote ticket sales and solicit event sponsorships. We suggest including a program flyer that include the names of the vendors and desserts. We recommend working with local and regional media sources to showcase the students impacted by the event.

Costs/ Resources Needed

Costs include food, dessert, bar, and entertainment (\$20,000). Supplies included tablecloths and decorations (\$5,000). Student volunteers are critical; we enlisted students to greet guests, work the coat checkroom, discuss our department at stations throughout the venue, bus tables, and help during set up and clean up. Nearly all students who volunteered were scholarship recipients in the previous academic year. All students received training on how to thank guests and provide a brief elevator speech about how guests’ donations empowered their education.

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