

**Boxing up Leadership! Building Excitement and Engaging Stakeholders through
Sponsored Welcome Boxes**

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

When our university received the official notice that fall 2020 classes would be entirely remote, we had to quickly rethink how to offer a yearlong, cohort-based leadership program to 60 undergraduates via Zoom. Like many leadership development programs at universities, our intentions remained the same as our on-campus model, offer an experience that equips students with the skills and mindsets needed to be successful in the workforce and make a positive difference in their world (Brungardt et al., 2006; Crawford et al., 2000; Keating et al., 2014). Mounting evidence finds remote instruction and the global pandemic is taking a negative toll on college student mental health and wellbeing (Wang et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020), thus it was important we explored new ways of connecting with our students, making them excited about the upcoming year. One way we accomplished this was by shipping an industry-sponsored welcome package to each student that included a welcome message, program materials, snacks, and other fun giveaways.

How it Works

Before starting the fall term, we collected addresses from all incoming students of the program, purchased supplies, and solicited sponsorships for the boxes. We purchased 10" x 10" x 5" white cardboard boxes designed with the university colors and logo. Inside the boxes, we included the program handbook, program culture card, a paperback copy of the term book, a few snacks (e.g., granola bars, candy), and assorted university-themed gifts (e.g., T-shirt, lip balm, notebooks, water bottles). The university-themed gifts were designed and created by the university's Printing and Mailing office and thus were unique items not to be found at the campus bookstore. We filled the box with colored raffia and topped it with a card. The card included a welcome message from the program administrators and the names and logos of the box sponsors. The Assistant Director of the leadership program contacted members of the advisory board to solicit sponsorships, inviting them to sponsor the boxes. Once assembled, the boxes were shipped or delivered in-person to each student in the program. Students were invited to author posts opening their boxes on social media page and tag the program. Stakeholders of the program (e.g., advisory board members, industry sponsors, guest speakers, etc.) liked and shared posts. New packages—this time in a 7.5" x 11" bubble mailer— were curated and shipped to students for the winter 2021 term. The package included a university-themed face mask, a paperback book for the term, supplementary materials to accompany the text, and fidget toys.

Results to Date

A total of 106 boxes were shipped to 53 students, spanning two terms. We solicited sponsors from members of the program's advisory board for the fall term boxes, totaling \$2,000. This included contributions from a company represented by one board member and an individual contribution from a second board member. The winter term boxes were sponsored by an industry company with a gift of \$2,000. Students were very excited to receive their boxes in the mail. This was evident by social media engagement and verbal share-outs during our weekly seminars. Their sharing, tagging, and liking on social media expanded our outreach, making this

innovation a strategy to build excitement among students and serve as a marketing, outreach, and recruitment opportunity. Seventy-four students and sponsoring companies authored posts on social media about their welcome boxes with much liking and sharing. Examples of posts from students included, "So excited and thankful for this course! Thank you for your hard work!", "Thank you so much for the lovely welcome box! I'm so excited to be a part of the Leadership Academy!" and "I can't wait to begin!". Anecdotal evidence from students revealed feelings of pride about involvement in the program, comradery with their peers, and joy about receiving fun gifts.

Program stakeholders, including deans, faculty, agriculture and forestry organizations, and advisory board members, were active on social media in response to the welcome boxes' posts. In addition to the funding we have received thus far, we have already received pledges from stakeholders to sponsor the boxes for the next two terms. What was created out of response to COVID-19 and the shift to remote instruction became an effective way to build excitement about a program, make students feel special, and engage industry stakeholders.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We recommend this innovation for programs, departments, or courses that wish to distribute physical material to students, build excitement about an upcoming class or program, and make students feel welcomed. We recommend adding fun gifts or "swag" items to the boxes to boost excitement. We utilized some cost-sharing by taking materials that were leftover marketing items through Printing and Mailing, including the lip balm, stickers, T-shirts, and notepads. The T-shirts were the most in-demand item; we recommend placing those in every box if possible. We also recommend branding the outside of the box as it is free advertising for the university and sponsors. For future boxes, we plan to include personalized messages to each student with either a personalized sticker (e.g., *Welcome to the Leadership Academy, Name!*) or a hand-written message from the administration team. We plan to postpone shipping the box for the spring term boxes until the end of the term. This will serve as a commencement box, and we will fill it with the official program graduation stole, a certificate of completion, and a note of congratulations on completing the program from the administrative team, mentors, family members, or advisory board members. We also plan to create more opportunities for sponsorships with the option to sponsor specific items in the boxes (e.g., book sponsor, swag sponsor). Additionally, we plan to expand our donor base by inviting program alumni to become welcome box sponsors (e.g., Class of 2011 sponsor).

Costs/Resources Needed

As the boxes were sponsored, the leadership program incurred no financial costs. The sponsorship covered the design, the contents, and the shipping of the boxes. The total estimated costs were \$2,000 for the fall term boxes and \$1,500 for the winter term packages. The main expenses were the decorated cardboard boxes (\$700 for 60 boxes), colored bubble mailers for the winter packages (\$106 for 62), and paperback copies of the books inside the boxes (~\$12/book). It took approximately 6 hours to design and assemble the boxes each term.

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