

Major Events on College Campuses in the Age of Covid-19

As we all look toward the spring and the hopeful return of major events to college campuses, there are numerous questions that schools need to address.

The entertainment industry – perhaps one of the hardest hit segments of the work force – wants nothing more than a return to business as usual. Unique solutions to the challenge of mass gatherings are found every day, and each new innovation leads to a greater hope for a return to normal.

Some of these innovations have already found their way into the college market: drive in concerts, socially distanced events, and hybrid shows can be seen across the country.

To get back to major events though will take an entirely different level of planning and preparation.

From the talent side, artists must be willing to perform in person to a live crowd both large and small. They must be willing to travel and to possibly quarantine upon arrival, and to be prepared to embrace a very different show environment. Some artists are ready to do this, while others are still extremely cautious and may wait for a vaccine to have been distributed.

Some industry insiders are discussing the idea of artists traveling with Covid-19 health monitors and policy enforcers. Others are discussing if artists should demand a premium for traveling during these difficult times. Regardless of what artists require, the cost and the responsibility of this will certainly be at least partially pushed onto the buyer.

There is also the concern about production. What new rules will be in place for sound and light vendors? Can and will schools be able to enforce their needs? How will the policies of a vendor coincide with the policies of both schools and artists? What happens if these policies conflict?

Schools need to consider a myriad of different scenarios, variables, and requirements if they are given permission to plan a major event. Not only do they need to take into consideration the requirements of the artists they are considering (i.e. a Covid-19 inspection and policy enforcement contract and DOS walkthrough), the vendors they hire, but also the rules of the school, city, county, state, as well as the possibility of changing federal regulations.

At a minimum, schools should be prepared to address the following:

1. Provide the artist with a clearly written copy of the school's current Covid-19 policy and enforcement plan, including but not limited to the response to a campus or local outbreak.
2. Have a written guidelines regarding how changes in the school, city, county, state, and federal Covid-19 regulations will affect any pending offer, contract, or finalized event (i.e. if the current policy allows for 50% capacity gatherings but a local outbreak drops the percentage to 25%, how will the school need to adjust its plans, and what is the response if the artist does not accept these changes).
3. Present a formal plan detailing how the school will deal with any day of show Covid-19 policy breaches (i.e. your audience rushes the stage, people congregate backstage despite being told not to, a member of the team suddenly comes down with a fever, etc.).
4. Be prepared for the artist to not accept whatever contingencies the school has in place, and what your school's response will be.
5. Understand that cancellation without penalty (i.e. Force Majeure) may not be as easy to enforce as it was last spring. Everyone knows the risks now, and artists may want a guarantee because of this. This may mean transitioning to a virtual event, attempting to reschedule, or paying a cancellation fee.

There are no easy answers regarding the return to the major events at colleges: this is new to everyone and there are no tested policies or plans. Even if there were, the situation is fluid. Everyone is still learning, and the environment is changing every day. The best course of action is to think through what might affect your event as it relates to the current crisis, and to be prepared to pivot if the situation changes.