

## Present A Rewarding Ceremony

Spring's steady fare of award and scholarship presentations, recognition ceremonies, and faculty and staff retirements presents challenges. Awards ceremonies often get a quick brush from planners because they fall into the realm of routine annual events and they happen during the busy spring season. For the honorees and their families, however, these are very special occasions. Receiving an award may be a career highlight or the only recognition a person ever receives for his or her efforts. So how do we make the day truly special?

### Stage It!

Begin planning by visiting the facility you will use and try to view it with fresh eyes and an open mind. Take a seat in the back of the room looking toward the stage to understand the audience's point of view. Recall previous years' ceremonies, and consider what worked, what didn't, and why.

Make careful notes of aisles, stairs onto the stage, curtains, lighting, and sound capabilities. While the set you create may be minimal, avoid decorating the stage with only a battered podium partially hidden by a large flower arrangement. Instead, think of ways to make the stage look filled, colorful, and branded.

Enlist the help of your theatre department to create a set that is attractive, articulates your brand, and properly lights all participants. Props appropriate to awards ceremonies might include painted flats or projected images of your campus signature buildings, faux classic Greek columns, or busts of famous writers, musicians, scientists, or other scholars.

A nice way to highlight the honored guests is to project their photos onstage as their names are called. Use a professional photographer to take photos in advance of people in their everyday environments. For major award winners, record very short video interviews. Both of these techniques lend visual interest to the stage and are fun and flattering for the winners.

If you will be building a stage in a ballroom, the size is up to you dictated by who and what you intend to put on it, but remember, the more crowded and the farther back the audience extends, the taller your stage needs to be. You will need two sets of sturdy portable stairs with handrails so that people can walk on and off the platform safely. Use skirting to hide the risers' metal legs, and set large potted plants near the edge to soften the look and so that the edge is visible to participants.

## Be Efficient

A well-managed awards ceremony should not last longer than one hour. To accomplish this, script the entire program and then use staff to do a "walk through," timing each element as you go. Trim as needed by rethinking the way things have always been done and taking new approaches. For example, is it necessary to have the dean give a 15-minute speech? How about switching to a five-minute talk? Do three soloists need to perform? How about reducing it to one?

In many awards ceremonies much time is wasted waiting while each recipient makes his or her way from the audience to the podium. If the group is small, have the winners process to the stage at the beginning of the program. To do this with a flourish, seat the audience then have the honorees march to music from the back of the room to the stage. The winners then take assigned seats on stage for the duration.

Another approach is to have winners lined up off-stage with a staff member cuing them to walk on at the appropriate time. After receiving the award, each winner walks off-stage to a seat in the front row of the audience so that she can enjoy the rest of the program.

## Script It

To ensure success, write a script for the entire program including cues for the speakers, winners, musicians, and lighting and sound technicians. Then, designate an emcee to read all introductions and move the program smoothly from item to item.

This eliminates a major time-wasting pitfall: allowing many people to access the microphone. Using multiple introducers can be risky because some will envision themselves at the Academy Awards Ceremony and ramble on forever, while others will arrive unprepared and try to "wing it."

Scripting evens the amount of material presented about each person and ensures a consistent format. Begin work on your script well in advance by collecting biographical information on all honorees. The same information can be used for a printed program.

Involve deans, vps or department representatives by having them escort winners on stage while the emcee reads, place the award in the winner's hands and escort him or her off stage; the only difference is the representative is not given a speaking part.

If honorees are to give a response, limit them to one minute and know that they will likely speak for three. Tell them they will be cued when time is up, and do so by signaling from the front row of the audience by flicking on a small colored flashlight. Give the speaker 30 seconds more to conclude. At that point, the music can come up or the emcee can interject a "thank-you."

## Practice Makes Perfect

A few days in advance, send participants reminders that include information about dress, when and where the ceremony will be held, and how long it is expected to take. Schedule a rehearsal to begin about 45 minutes before guests arrive. This is a good opportunity to determine if everyone has shown up and to briefly explain the program order. Let people practice walking onto the stage and speaking into the microphone if necessary. Write each person's name on a note card and use wide, clear packing tape to attach the label to his or her seat so each participant knows where to sit. This technique is also useful for marking standing positions on stage. Simply tape the card to the floor where the person should stand.

Practice tricky moves such as placing medals around people's necks or presenting heavy trophies. Clearly mark all plaques and other awards so that the presenter doesn't mix them up.

## Down in Front

Just how do you get people to sit in the front? Under-set chairs for the number of guests you expect, thus forcing people to use all available places. Have additional seating readily available to be brought out should the need arise.

If you are using an auditorium with far more seats than needed, try using some or all of these techniques. First, block off access to balconies and upper levels with cording until the entire lower level is filled. Use ushers to escort people to seats, filling the room from the front to the rear. Use cording or ribbon to block rear seats or entire seating sections. Open them later if necessary.

Assign "VIP" seating in the front for honorees, families, scholarship donors, university officials, and any other group you choose. Give them tickets in advance or use a simple color-coded system to direct them. For example, tell them their seats are in the "blue section" and mark the ends of the corresponding rows with blue bows. Be certain the ushers know your system.