
PRESENTERS:

Sophia Pereyra-Johnston
Jessica Evotia Andrews-Hall

Fun with Purpose: Social Programming that Grows Chapters

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OVERVIEW

Every district wants to do more than survive—it wants to thrive. Yet many organizations struggle with member engagement, retention, and creating a strong sense of community. This session will share how the Seattle Music Teachers Association used intentional social programming as a strategy to strengthen its chapter culture and drive measurable growth.

Four years ago, we launched a social programming initiative focused on creating joyful, meaningful opportunities for members to connect outside of traditional business meetings and events. Since then, our chapter has experienced a 42% increase in membership, a 42% increase in financial growth, and significant gains in participation, engagement, and member satisfaction. These efforts contributed to recognition as MTNA Local Association of the Year in 2025, along with Washington State Music Teachers Association Chapter of the Year honors in 2022 and 2024.

Attendees will learn practical strategies for building connection, increasing engagement, and fostering a vibrant district culture. We will also discuss how to overcome resistance to change, gain leadership support, and implement new ideas successfully.

The session includes an interactive workshop in which attendees will develop a customized action plan and leave with a toolkit of adaptable ideas to strengthen their own districts. By creating spaces for friendship, belonging, and fun, chapters can build more sustainable and thriving communities.

CASE STUDY: Seattle Chapter's Success
Social Programming: 3 — Year Experiment

42% Membership growth
42% Financial growth
4.7/5 Satisfaction score

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING: SMTA's Transformative Journey

- ~Major boost in member satisfaction scores
- ~Significant increase in member involvement
- ~Higher retention and a surge in new membership
- ~Recognized excellence

THE IMPORTANCE AND POWER OF HAVING FUN TOGETHER

Why is it so important to have fun together as district members?

What is it exactly about social experiences and outings that bond us to each other so well?

- Intimate conversations help build vulnerability, trust and psychological safety, all foundational steps for friendship and positive organizational culture (Coyle, 2019)
- Casual social outings help us bond on a personal level; we are encouraged to talk about topics that are meaningful to us outside of work, such as family, travel, life reflections
- Fun events help to form new group norms for our chapters that show it is okay to be our full selves and form deeper connections than just professional relationships
- Psychological safety and a sense of belonging lead to organizational commitment behaviors, group cohesion, high engagement, and retention (Coyle, 2019)
- Members are inspired to engage more with volunteering, events, business meetings, etc. because they formed strong relationships and feel like they belong

THE SCIENCE BEHIND ORGANIZATIONS THAT INHABIT THE STRONGEST CULTURES

- Organizational culture is something you DO, not just something you believe, and it happens via member relationships
- Psychological safety (feeling safe to be your true self and to share openly with others) helps to build trust and connections with others
- Feeling like you belong in a group and share a purpose and future together helps build positive organizational culture

HOW CAN YOU BUILD A SENSE OF SAFETY AND BELONGING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

- Build connections between members - if members feel included in your social group, they are more likely to continue membership (Newheiser, 2017)
- Send belonging cues:
 - Personal, up-close connection (body language, attention and behavior that communicates ‘I care’)
 - Big-picture perspective (larger, connected conversations that show life is bigger than work – we don’t need to always talk about our students!)
- Send the message - you are in a safe place to give effort:
 - You are part of this group
 - This group is special and we have high standards here
 - We believe you can reach these standards
 - You belong here!
- Over communicate your listening and care
- Show your fallibility, especially if you are a leader
 - Be the first one to show vulnerability, which will open the door for another member to show vulnerability (this builds trust)
- Energy: Invest in the social exchange that is occurring in the moment
- Future orientation: Signal the relationship will continue
- Create opportunities to connect with each other in a focused way
 - This can be done through fun events together and deep conversations
 - Leaders should lead this effort and connect with all members to set the positive culture tone

SMTA's SOCIAL EVENTS

Here are some of our favorite social events that we have held in the past three years. Hopefully your chapter will gain inspiration from these when planning your own events!

- All member brunch - celebrate the start of the school year
- Board member house party
- Meany Hall Series: Isata Khanneh-Mason, piano
- New members: information session and happy hour: ZOOM
- “This is Halloween” burlesque show @ Triple Door
- New members: information session and happy hour at Percy’s & Co
- Sonic symphony @ Paramount Theater
- Meany Series: Michelle Cann, pianist
- Life & Times of Malcolm X at Seattle Opera
- Dinner Party Series: 3-member hosted dinners at their homes
- Meany Series:

Calder Quartet with Antoine Hunter's Urban Jazz Dance Company

- Barber of Seville at Seattle Opera
- Mozart and Mutts, a concert series that benefits rescue dogs at Pono Ranch
- Ravel's Piano Concerto in G at Seattle Symphony, Benaroya Hall

Dinner together at Wild Ginger downtown

- Meany Hall Series, Emmanuel Ax - VIP intermission event for SMTA
- December holiday party at member's home
- Green Lake Pathway of Lights and dinner Noi Thai afterward
- Les Troyens In Con at Seattle Opera, McCaw Hall
- Board game night at Mox Boarding House
- Paint & Sip painting class in Kirkland
- Sleep Beauty at Pacific Northwest Ballet
- Meany Hall Series: Conrad Tao and Caleb Teicher
- Meany Hall Series: Silkroad Ensemble: Uplifted Voices with special guest Pura Fe
- Meany Hall Series: Third Coast Percussion and Jessie Montgomery
- Nicole Zuraitis, pianist at Jazz Alley
- Let's walk at Seward Park together!

MOST POPULAR:

~Dinner Party Series: free dinner cooked and hosted by a member at their home

~Meany Hall Series: innovative musical performances at University of Washington

LEAST POPULAR:

~Early morning events

~High-priced events

~Zoom Meetups

~events held Monday through Thursday in the evening

Here are some other member event ideas to try out!

- Wine tastings and classes at a winery
- Speed Friending: 2-minute round robin with each member and then open mixer
- Escape rooms: builds team cohesion!
- Partner with local performing arts organizations and create special VIP experiences for your members

- Walk or hike in a natural setting with a picnic
 - Attend an art walk
 - Check out an exhibition at a gallery or museum
 - Collaborate with another local chapter to create events together for networking
 - Holiday-themed activity such as a haunted pub crawl
 - District Pals: pair members for coffee date based on their similarities and interests
 - Record-listening party
 - Open mic night or themed karaoke
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WHY DID WE CHOOSE THESE SPECIFIC MEMBER EVENTS?

- To change the culture from one that was very business-oriented to one that also focuses on developing deeper relationships between members (i.e. if your members only attend business and professional events together, the norms of the group will be more professional and less safe for personal conversations; lack of bonding, sense of belonging, and not being our full selves impacts group cohesion negatively)(Newheiser et al., 2017)
- Focus on having fun together through a wide variety of events that would be of interest to many members
- Importance of having a combination of free and not free events
- Intimate spaces where it was easy to converse (i.e. a member's home, a restaurant, backyard party, happy hours)
- Most events held at a mid-point between the 30-mile span where members live to make attending accessible for all
- Hosted 2-3 social events per month
- Feedback from the member survey: weekends during the day and evening were best for our members, as well as some later evenings during the week
- Dinner Party Series: this idea was developed after many members shared that they would like more of an opportunity to get into deeper conversations with other members to get to know them better
 - A member volunteers to cook for a group of 5-10 and host at their home

Member survey:

- To build engagement, you will need to understand what your members are most interested in and what their needs are, and try to fill those needs
- Social events survey: make a list of types of events your district offers and have members rank them in terms of interest
 - also ask what times/days work best for them

- Use the feedback from members to create your social strategy plan for the year

The Roadmap for all chapters to increase engagement, commitment, and satisfaction:

- Create a social team of member volunteers who are highly enthusiastic, like to meet people, and can attend most of the events
 - Send out a short survey to see what events and days/time are most popular
 - Create a social events calendar for the full year so members can plan ahead - members in SMTA loved this!
 - Think outside of the box when choosing events - adopt a growth mindset and learn as you go (example: our team's failure with new member events)
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Advertising your events:

- Create vibrant, colorful and fun flyers to circulate to all members!
- Follow up with individual members and invite them directly
 - Direct invitations make members feel special and like you are thinking of them
- Invite member social influencers who enjoy the events, will invite other members, and help host
- Choose events that are of interest to members, at days/times that work for them
- Post on social media and advertise at your general business meetings!

The Takeaways:

- Take small steps toward organizational culture change; this happens over time and not all of a sudden
- Start with planning one social event and get member feedback
- Focus on events that allow for talking on a personal level easily to give time for meaningful conversations
- Decide that it is important to create opportunities to connect not just on a professional level, but also on a personal level to forge friendships and build chapter cohesion and commitment

Please feel free to contact Sophia & Jessica at smtasocialevents@gmail.com for any recommendations or advice on how to increase satisfaction and engagement in your chapters!