



# RETENTION

## What is Retention?

Retention is the process of ensuring that your members or volunteers remain active with your organization. Retention is not a particularly formal process. Instead, it focuses on maintaining a welcome environment, member morale, and organizational progress.

## Why is Retention Important?

Retention is important for a variety of reasons, which includes having:

- \* A happy organizational community
- \* A pool of members who you can count on to help when needed
- \* A pool of members who could potentially be future leaders
- \* A strong indicator of organizational success

## Retention Basics

### Levels of Activeness

It is important to acknowledge that members can be active with your organization at a variety of levels. Some members like to help with planning programs, some like to attend programs, and some just like to be on the listserv. Regardless of their level of activeness, though, retention is critical.

### Keys to Strong Retention

- \* **Involvement:** Get your members involved with program planning and implementation. Invite them to help with as many aspects of your organization and programming as possible. Remember students generally dislike just sitting at meetings and hearing others speak. Offer them things that are active.
- \* **Ownership:** Let your members participate in decision making, or at least give them opportunities to openly voice their needs, interests, and opinions. In addition to decision making, ownership also includes getting them involved (see above).
- \* **Benefits:** Offer benefits or incentives for your members to be active in your organization. Benefits can be tangible, intangible, or both. Important benefits include sense of belonging and community.

## Retention Strategies

### Conversations

Having simple conversations with members can go a long way in terms of creating a welcome environment and ensuring that members feel comfortable in the organization. Conversations don't necessarily have to deal with organizational business or issues. Small-talk and chit-chat are just as good.

### Updates

People can generally lose interest in an organization if they don't know what the organization is doing or what it has planned. Constant updates, whether through emails, newsletters, websites, or meetings, are key to maintaining a base-level of interest.

### - General meetings:

General meetings are popular ways to disseminate information and update members. However, the drawback with general meetings is that it is a passive activity. In other words, members merely sit and listen to the leadership speak. Although such meetings are good to have once or twice at the beginning of the year, meetings during the rest of the year should focus on getting members involved in some activity.

Students' time is valuable so do your best to make their time at a meeting worthwhile and productive.

**- Remember:**

If things can be said or done via email, then use email instead of reciting information or gathering ideas during a meeting.

**Participation Channels**

In order to give members ownership of the organization, they need to have opportunities to participate in decision making and offer feedback. Channels for such participation need to be made available to members. Channels may include emails, discussion boards, chat rooms, or meetings.

**- Town-hall meetings:**

An increasingly popular participation channel is a town-hall meeting. Unlike a general meeting where the leadership usually does most of the speaking, a town-hall meeting is an open forum where members can voice their questions, concerns, issues, and praise. Town-hall meetings are good ways to gauge the needs, interests, and opinions of members in order to improve the organization.

**Organization**

Being an organized organization contributes to making your organization attractive for students to want to be active members. An organization that is constantly disorganized and does sloppy work can be unappealing to current and future members.

**Social Activities**

No matter what type of organization you have, it's always a good idea to offer periodic social activities so that members can relax and get to know the leadership and each other better during informal times. Social activities don't need to be grand in scale or expensive. Simple, small-scale activities such as dinner outings, sport activities, shopping, retreats, and short trips are some ideas.

**Retention Issues**

**Alienation**

It is often easy for the leaders or active members of an organization to talk with each other and not with members who aren't as active or who are shy. One negative outcome of this unwelcoming environment is a feeling of alienation from those who already know each other. And as a result of this alienation, other negative outcomes such as discomfort, disenfranchisement, and resentment may occur.

**- Remember:**

You can talk to your friends any other time so use time at meetings and programs wisely by helping new or shy members feel welcome.

**Conversations**

Related to the issue of alienation is the issue of creating conversation. Simple conversations help create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere. Do your best to create conversation with members, especially those you haven't met before or don't see often. It may feel uncomfortable or weird at first, but it's relatively easy once you get over the initial shyness or awkwardness.

**Communication**

Communicating with members is critical for retention because it is the power by which members stay informed and involved. With communication, organizational leaders can impart information and updates to members. In addition, members can use communication channels such as emails and meetings to voice their opinions, participate in decision making, and share their ideas.