

## **EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: CONTROVERSIAL SERVICE/CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS--HOW TO COOL THE FIRE**

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### **Issue(s) Being Addressed:**

When a higher education institution hosts a service or civic engagement project there exists the possibility that it may be viewed as controversial and requires additional effort to stay focused on the main goal.

### **Actions to Consider:**

Service and civic engagement projects are often selected because a group seeks to meet community needs while teaching participants about a particular issue. Whether performing acts of service, hosting an educational lecture, or raising funds for an important cause, not everyone will view the project as positive and beneficial. They may not support the project for moral or ethical reasons. It is important to be proactive and find positive ways to address such controversy.

### **Overview:**

For the past two years Ferris State University (FSU) has been involved with The Vagina Monologues/V-Day movement. FSU became involved in the theatrical production in order to increase awareness of issues facing women and children both here in the U.S. and also abroad. This was also an attempt to raise money for a local women's shelter that had recently experienced budget cuts which slashed programs and staff.

The project was plagued with controversy from the beginning. It was important to find out why people were upset, and then begin to find solutions to address their concerns. There were a number of small events such as informational meetings held around campus which helped to explain the movement and how people could become involved in many different ways. There was also a call for community and faculty participants to increase the depth and credibility of the message. These people then became advocates within their peer groups, allowing committee members to concentrate their efforts in other areas. Next, the student newspaper became involved. They wrote articles on different aspects of the movement--from the actual production to the worldwide issues that were addressed through the play. A male sports writer was asked to review the play materials and explain the message to the campus male population through editorials. The next step was to encourage people to spread the message. Working with the Office of Minority Affairs and the campus chapter of the National Organization for Women, the committee developed a month long lecture series. Every Tuesday and Thursday a new topic from the play was discussed within a lecture that was typically hosted by a faculty or community member. This allowed people to move past the play and right into the important issues depicted.

### **Key Components:**

- Address the public with positive messages.
- Make the message personal. People need to understand how an issue affects them.
- Do not expect to please everyone, but work to please as many as possible.
- Seek to address the controversy in the beginning.
- Make sure that everyone working on the project is well versed on the relevant issues.