

NCSSSMST Student Conferences Helps Students Find Common Ground

Student paper by Meg Barnett

It is Saturday night, and I watch as 350 students and chaperones file past me off of a boat and onto buses. They glance casually at my worn sign, following its pointed, red arrow down the brick sidewalk and into the black night. For the last time, they follow my voice; listen to my directions but, ultimately, they walk out of my life. To the students and chaperones, I've just been a face, a girl in a "Staff" t-shirt telling them where to go and when to get there. However, for the past three years, these 350 faces have dictated my schedule and consumed my life. As a conference planner for the NCSSSMST Fall 2007 Event "Tomorrow Never Dies" I am a member of a group of 25 students, all charged with the duty of crafting the past three days of these students' lives.

On Thursday, October 17, I watched as the students trudged into the Fairview Marriot Hotel, exhausted after long plane, car, and bus rides. As a designated greeter, I spoke to each student personally, asking about their background and hometown. How many students go to your school? Do you have sports teams? What kinds of classes are you taking? I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I was overwhelmed with the variety of replies fired back at me. While some schools harbored thousands of bustling students, others taught fewer than two hundred. Although we were all part of this National Consortium, I fought to find common ground with these new kids.

Their sleepy dispositions soon disappeared as we whisked them onto buses to the George Mason University (GMU). We had planned the conference to start with a night full of activity, including presentations, dinner, a panel discussion, a talent show and a t-shirt exchange. Although the students were shy to meet one another, they soon laughed and joked, trading their high school's t-

shirts for those with exotic names or designs. As the students filed back onto their respective buses to return to the hotel, the students smiled, exhausted but excited for the next few days.

Friday began with a series of presentations and lectures at GMU. Students had signed up for specific topics, ranging from the nature of popular music to water filtration systems. Each individual focused on a topic of choice, a specialty in the field of math and science. Although this morning event divided the group, they united again to take a tour of the university. Slowly, our hodgepodge of students from across the nation gained common ground and shared common experiences. We are all applying, or will soon apply, to various colleges, a universal stress. Slowly, the differences between the magnet schools began to shrink as the similarities between the students emerged.

That afternoon, the group traveled back to Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, to listen to a few more presentations and take a tour of technology laboratories. Staffers had the chance to showcase our projects, our talents and our home. While the students cruised down the high school hallways, we bustled around the building, working.

After returning from Thomas Jefferson High School, the students relaxed in their hotel rooms for a few hours, lazily watching television or taking a nap. Staffers hustled and bustled about the hotel, preparing for the next leg of our journey: a trip to the Cannon Building of the Capitol for a panel discussion on greenhouse gases. If this event went well, everything else would fall into place. As a member of this advance team, I arrived early at the building. For a few hours, we rushed to make sure the evening would run smoothly. We

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cleaned chairs and set up microphones. We frantically waited for caterers, praying they would arrive before our hoards of students. Despite the chaos of the set-up period, everything was ready by the time the buses reached the building. Our panelists included scientists and politicians, each providing a different spin on the issue of climate change. The panelists agreed and disagreed, applauded each other and debated with one another. Although the students only had time to ask a few questions, the panelists worked to engage everyone and present relatable information to the group. Despite any initial set-backs, the night proceeded without a hitch. As the Capitol sweeps team of staff members drove back to the hotel at the end of the night, I felt a surge of pride for my fellow planners.

On Saturday morning, the subject matter shifted from science to history. The students enjoyed presentations about the U2 incident and the CIA, and then students explored the Spy Museum in Washington, DC. They toured the Capitol building, as well as the National Mall. The students perused the various museums, enjoying the opportunity to relax outside in the sun.

For the staffers, our job was nowhere near done. We arranged a scavenger hunt for groups of participating students, leading them to various DC museums. Afterwards, we loaded onto our buses one last time – for a moonlight cruise along the Potomac River. Although we watched the monuments as they passed us on the horizon, we finally kicked back and shed our academic focus. For the first time, we were no longer members of magnet schools across the nation but simply kids. We ate, talked, laughed and danced. We finally knew each other as more than students; we became friends.

And now, here I am, watching as the students file off of the boat. I no longer see them as nameless blurs, but as individual faces and people. In the darkness, I see a blotch of red along the horizon, nearing me every moment – a hoard of 25 students, each wearing the same red “Staff” t-shirt. I smile, knowing this is the last time we will all be together, wearing our shirts, united under a common goal. We all come from different groups of friends and different backgrounds, but over the past three years of conference planning, we have become a family. Each of these students has helped make this event happen and contributed in a unique way. As staffers wave good-bye to me, hurrying onto their buses to shepherd the students back to the hotel, I silently thank them for their dedication and determination. Finally, I turn away, walking back to the reality of my everyday life, but knowing that I am part of something bigger.

