

Society of College and University Planning

The following interview was conducted with SCUP's President two years after XYZ University completed a Membership Growth Strategy for the organization.

What was the main challenge that motivated you to seek help?

We peaked in membership in 2015, which was SCUP's 50th anniversary year. A large number of people came back to the annual conference that year and registered using the member rate. Then, over the course of the next couple of years, people moved back out of the organization. They came to our anniversary to celebrate the past, but they weren't necessarily aligned with our future -- and that was on us. We realized we were going through the normal association lever-pulling and mechanics of a value prop and having all kinds of important conversations, but we weren't getting to the root of what we needed to do. We even started using the term 'community' as a goal. But we still had people who would attend our conferences, read our content, and buy our products without joining. We weren't in a time of crisis, but we were in a sense of strategic urgency. We needed a change.

Why did you choose to work with Sarah Sladek and the team at XYZ University?

I was very familiar with Sarah from her presentations at ASAE, her many books, and for the work she had done. As a result, I was able to draft a proposal to allow a single sourcing of a consultant. I did not do an RFP. I requested the board's permission to source Sarah Sladek as our consultant specifically for her expertise and based on our expected outcomes.

What results did the organization realize after hiring us?

We have a niche and we're deliberate about mission alignment now. We're hearing from more people. The strategy was delivered in March 2020, right as the world was shutting down because of pandemic. But what was nice about the entire research process was that it brought in the voice of our community. So the qualitative and quantitative data XYZ University gathered did not change much during pandemic. We were able to move forward and see results regardless. The report helped us make the right decisions and we are now rendering a slow but steady rebuild of our membership. We've been purpose driven and we've done the right things for the right people at the right time. We're drawing in people who need SCUP's service and community. And we are growing.

What did you like the most about working with us?

A few things. What I most appreciated was that your approach did not require a heavy lift from my team in any regard. I've worked with other consultants where the lift to get to the desired outcome is overbearing. Whereas your approach was outlining some universal truths and challenging those truths alongside our community. The process provided a clean runway for members and past members to really say their truths.

Then, as data points were brought forward, it was never like, 'Oh my gosh, 5% of your group thinks you guys are clowns.' It was never like that. Sarah provided perspective into why people think and feel these things, including societal pressures, and she challenged us to create change. She pushed us to think about what the research meant and to get to the root cause of membership decline. That's what you hire someone like Sarah to do in terms of research. Her reputation was validated by our experience.

What I also appreciated about Sarah's work was that she didn't come in with any presumptions of our culture. She sought to understand our culture and create a process to support it. I think that's really important.

Lastly, the facilitation piece Sarah did with our board was very, very good. It can be difficult in a roomful of experts which move into a circular discussion, building on previous stories and experiences. Navigating away from that is a very skillful thing to do, which Sarah did very well, making sure appreciative inquiry is in there to move to the next build. Her facilitation expertise really kicked in and kept us moving forward.

Was there anything that we could improve to make it better for future customers like you?

It's not so much about improving, but just a word of advice to future customers. It takes time. We were mindful of the report as we responded to people and went about our operations. Over time, that's what's served us best. We took a deliberate approach of using the report to continually ask, 'Should be doing this or not?'. We tried many

things and some didn't work right away. But that's okay. The permission to experiment with an informed approach was something my staff felt empowered by. We started to innovate. It takes trying new things and being open to new ideas. It takes time and effort. But eventually, you get there. We did.

Would you recommend our work to other organizations like yours? If so, why?

Yes. Hard truths that came out in that report, but the collaboration between provider and association was unique. When I've worked with other consultants, there's usually a right way and a wrong way of doing things. That wasn't the case here. There was an effort to maintain our culture and our insights were really welcomed. As I mentioned, I was surprised and delighted by the way Sarah navigated conversations with the board. It came with specific data and engaged conversation. For a while, it was just Sarah and the board going back and forth. I thought that part of the process paid for itself. I know it costs money to do research, but I paid for that moment when our board would be able to understand our members and positioning and move forward with some key decisions.

Anything else you'd like to add?

We hired XYZ University for the research, but the identifier was Sarah and her interpretation of the research and recommendations for going forward. She put things into perspective and explained the societal pressures, impacts, and transformations we need to be mindful of. We didn't simply receive a deliverable from a consultancy with a label. The report was personalized and Sarah presented the research and led the coaching calls, so it wasn't hard for my staff and everyone else to just immediately identify the project with Sarah. Sarah is curious as to why before she worries about how to get it done. She has that very welcoming and inclusive personality, and she also questions intent and durability. We've been able to deliver better results because she asked better questions.