A SmallFest Success

The Carolina Union's pivot of its annual FallFest to a virtual event helped hundreds of students and student organizations connect.

From August 24-28, the Carolina Union hosted a series of virtual events to promote involvement in UNC student organizations. The series, called SmallFest, was held in place of Carolina's annual FallFest celebration and involvement fair, which typically draws a crowd of more than 20,000 people and is a major catalyst for involvement at UNC.

The week featured the release of student-produced recruitment videos called SmallFest Films, and culminated with the SmallFest Student Organization Showcase, an online platform on the HeelLife website for students to explore groups and meet on Zoom with those that matched their interests. The events garnered significant participation:

- More than 200 student organizations participated in SmallFest or SmallFest Films
- 597 students met with student organizations during SmallFest
- 6,560 video views for SmallFest Films, from 700 unique viewers
- 62,699 impressions on SmallFest social media posts

The participation numbers indicate a desire and need among students to find ways to get involved despite social and physical distancing, said Tammy Lambert, assistant director for student organizations in the office of Student Life and Leadership, and one of the organizers of the SmallFest.

Lambert said SLL will continue creating programs to help students connect with organizations and is currently in the early stages of organizing another involvement fair to be held in October.

"It's just as important to make those friends and to make those connections," Lambert said of involvement in student life. "This year, we might have to work harder, and we might have to get more creative but getting involved is still a critical piece of life at college."
Echoing Lambert's comments about the importance of connection, senior Kylie VanDerMolen said she first stepped onto UNC's campus as a student four years ago with excitement to dive into college life but trepidation about her very small network of friends.

"I really didn't know anybody," VanDerMolen said. While attending FallFest her first year she sought out Carolina Vibe, a dance company that specializes in jazz, contemporary and hip-hop performances. Her involvement has not only provided a social foundation and creative outlet, it is now a leadership experience as she serves as president of the 30-member group.

Carolina Vibe met with several potential new members at SmallFest and encouraged them to submit audition videos, which they will accept through the middle of September, VanDerMolen said.

In another SmallFest virtual meeting room, The Buddy Project, a group that connects students to mental health resources and focuses on suicide prevention, greeted several students as well.

"A lot of them just didn't know what our club was, so we explained what our club was, what we did," said group president Emily Torborg. "And we talked a little bit about their year and how they were adjusting."

Research provided by SLL supports the idea that campus involvement is a critical part of a successful college experience. A 2019 study published by the Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship linked deep involvement in quality co-curricular activities with thriving in college.

"Involvement expands learning beyond the classroom," said Lee Roberts, student programs coordinator for SLL. "It's a chance to take what you are learning and apply it to help strengthen an organization, so the skill-building that occurs is critical."

Roberts also pointed to the sense of belonging that involvement in a group creates.

"Student organizations are a chance to connect people across disciplines and across majors," Roberts said. "I think it's even more critical right now to feel connected to campus, whether you are here physically or participating in Carolina Away. Student organizations offer a way to make sure you have that connection."
The semester ahead for VanDerMolen and Carolina Vibe is an opportunity to connect in new ways, as the group transitions to virtual choreography, rehearsals and performances. VanDerMolen expects the new format to present challenges but is confident her team will adjust. Most of all, she’s excited simply to have meaningful contact with a people she cares about.

“It’s really special to be able to talk to all the people I feel really close to,” she said. “I’ve been on the team since I was a freshman. It’s a nice feeling to be able to have something in common with a group of people, and just get together and share the experiences we’re having in this time. It’s nice to have a group you can rely on.”

SmallFest Films