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Planning Effective Meetings

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Planning effective meetings is crucial to the overall success of your Inn. And consciously planning for collegiality, mentoring and education is key to the success of each meeting. Consider the desired outcome for each part of the meeting - the opening reception or cocktail hour, the dinner, the program presentation and the resulting discussion. Attending to the details will enhance the impact of the meeting.

Meetings create an experience for the participant. During the short period, they are your audience. It is the good or bad experience that they remember. You have control and responsibility for the experience.

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Planning Effective Meetings

- Why plan meetings
- Frequency
- Location
- Agenda
- Meals
- Insurance

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In this session, we will talk about why planning meetings is important, as well as the logistic details of meetings: frequency, location, agenda, meals and insurance.

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Why plan meetings?

- Enhance collegiality
- Maximize educational opportunities
- Promote mentoring

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Is it enough preparation just to set the time and place for a meeting and expect everyone to show up and enjoy themselves? If you've ever given a successful party, you know that planning is the key. Planning for your Inn's monthly meetings ensures that the goals and expectations for the event--to enhance collegiality, provide education, and promote mentoring-- are met and even exceeded.

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Enhance collegiality

- Makes people feel welcome
- Shared experience
- Encourages commitment to attend
- Adds vitality and interest

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Have you ever attended an event that seemed haphazard and unplanned? Did it affect your participation and overall experience? Careful planning of a meeting communicates the feeling that members are expected and are welcome - someone took the time and trouble to think about the meeting ahead of time. Through well-planned meetings, members learn and experience what the Inns of Court is all about-- growing closer as a group through individual participation. Once this organized experience becomes a part of your Inn culture, members will be more committed to the Inn and to participating in the meetings because they look forward to an interesting and vibrant experience.

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Maximize educational opportunities

- Facilitates program excellence
- Promotes interesting, lively discussion

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The most important part of an Inn meeting is the program and discussion. Planning a good, challenging program starts long before the meeting. The Program Committee meets in the summer, plans programs overall for the year, and makes team assignments before the first meeting in September.

At this first meeting, these pupillage teams assemble to discuss and delegate the responsibilities for their monthly program. The teams may meet outside of the monthly Inn meeting in order to prepare an outstanding presentation.

Don't overlook the importance of the discussion following the program presentation. It takes a good moderator to manage and facilitate a lively discussion. The moderator must plan the way he or she will lead a good discussion.

More information on program development can be found in the module entitled "Model for Program Development".

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Promote mentoring

- Opportunities for informal mentoring
- Use seating to promote mentoring
- Recognize importance of incidental mentoring

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Planning all phases of an Inn meeting offers opportunities to facilitate and enhance mentoring. For example, when arriving for the cocktail hour, Masters may be asked to engage other non-master members in brief discussions about an assigned topic, such as observations of civility or incivility during the past month.

Planning the seating during dinner offers further opportunities to promote mentoring. Members may be seated by pupillage team or paired mentoring teams may sit together.

The incidental mentoring that occurs through the shared Inn experience is also of value, such as the discussion following a group presentation.

For more information about informal and formal mentoring programs, please see the module entitled "Mentoring".

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Frequency of Meetings

- Minimum of 6 -- average of 7
- Usually follows academic calendar
- Date to remember easily, like second Tuesday

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We've discussed the reasons why planning the Inn's monthly meeting is important. Now let's talk about the logistical details that need attention in this planning process.

Inns are required in the Organizational Charter to have a minimum of six regular meetings. Based on information collected through the Inn Annual Report Self-Evaluation, Inns conduct an average of seven annual program meetings, not including banquets and special meetings. Some Inns have eight to ten with one of the meetings designed as a holiday or end-of-the-year celebration.

Most Inns meet from September through May or June, but any meeting schedule may be followed as long as there are at least six meetings.

Meetings should be scheduled on an easily remembered basis. For example, meetings would be held on the second Tuesday of each month.

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Location of Meetings

- Dinner and meeting in contiguous space



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The next logistical detail is the location of the monthly meeting. About half of the Inns meet in restaurants. About a third of the Inns hold meetings in the local courthouse where there is usually a dining hall adequate for serving dinner. About 10% hold meetings in educational facilities. The rest meet in assorted places, even including private homes.

The dinner and meeting should be held in the same or contiguous space so that the Inn doesn't "lose" members going from dinner to the program or vice-versa.

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Meeting Agenda

- Meal function 30 - 60 min.
- Opening remarks 5 min.
- Pupillage team program 45 min.
- Critique & discussion 30 - 45 min.
- Adjournment 5 min.

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Once a location has been determined, the next step is to determine the amount of time that each meeting should take. It is important to communicate the duration of the meeting to all members and to start and finish the meeting on time. Attendance will improve when members can rely on the duration and timing of the meeting.

Meetings generally run about an hour and a half, exclusive of the meal function. Eating dinner before the program prevents the program from being cut short, or the dinner from being delayed.

The agenda for a typical Inn meeting looks something like this:

Meal Function: 30-60 min.

Opening Remarks by the President and Inn Business: 5 min.

Pupillage Team Demonstration: 45 min.

Critique and Discussion: 30-45 min.

Adjournment: 5 min.

TOTAL TIME: 2-3 hrs.

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First meeting of the year (if no orientation meeting)

- Introduce officers
- History of AIC movement and Inn
- Member introductions
- Program topic assignment
- Pupillage team discussion
- Meal function

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Here is a sample agenda for the first Inn meeting of the year, usually in September, if there is no separate orientation meeting. It is designed to give new members an introduction to the American Inns of Court movement, as well as to the Inn they are joining.

You should begin with the introduction of the Inn's officers, followed by a brief history of the American Inns of Court Movement and the local Inn. Members of the Inn should then have an opportunity to introduce themselves. You may wish to have the pupillage teams sit together during the meal to discuss the topic that their meeting will focus on. This will give them the opportunity to start working on the planning of their team's presentation.

For more in-depth information regarding new member orientation, please see the module entitled "New Member Orientation."

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Planning the meal function

- Tradition of "breaking bread"
- Type of meal
- Cocktail/social hour
- Planned seating
- Payment for meals
- Liability insurance

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Some type of meal function should be part of each Inn meeting. Sitting down to break bread together on a regular basis is a tradition derived from the English Inns. It provides an essential experience of Inn membership and contributes greatly to collegiality and mentoring opportunities. The type of meal may vary and depends on what the members are willing to pay. Some Inns hold elaborate, catered meals costing as much as \$40-\$50, which in turn drives local dues upwards as high as \$400-\$500 per year. The decision as to an acceptable expense for the meal function should be decided upon by the Inn's executive committee. Holding meetings at a restaurant is generally less expensive than using a caterer and it makes the planning easier.

Many Inns have a cocktail hour at the beginning of the evening. It is a good idea to provide members with time to unwind and enjoy conversation before dinner or the program. A cash bar, as opposed to an open bar, helps to keep members' dues low. Alcohol may be served at dinner, but adds to the overall meal costs. Care must be taken that the serving of alcohol does not affect the quality of the Inn's programs.

Most Inns use some method of planned seating during meals. The advantage of planned seating is that all categories of membership - Masters of the Bench, Barristers, Associates, and Pupils - can be interspersed to foster mentoring. A variation of assigned seating for the meal is seating by pupillage teams. The team presenting the program may assign a discussion topic during dinner and then have each team report to the larger group after dinner. Random or spontaneous seating may not accomplish the goals of the Inn; people tend to sit with their friends and a good mix of members is rarely achieved.

Payment for meals should be collected as part of the dues at the beginning of the Inn year. There are problems with the "pay as you go" method of collecting money for meals. Members may feel less motivated to attend a dinner and a meeting for which they have made no prior financial commitment.

The American Inns of Court Foundation carries a national general and umbrella liability policy covering all active Inns for its legal obligations for damages due to bodily injury and property damage. Because each Inn is an unincorporated association, liability may extend to the individual members and volunteers with respect to operations of the Inn. Liability coverage includes host liquor liability. A copy of our current Certificate of Liability Insurance can be found in the related resources for this module.

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Encouraging attendance

- Attendance policy
 - Allowed absences
 - Excused/unexcused absences
 - Financial implications
 - Role of guests
 - Enforcement

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Consistent attendance by all members is important to the success of the Inn meeting. An established attendance policy that is followed encourages members to take the commitment of membership seriously and leads to meetings that are well attended. To make sure everyone is aware of it and to ensure impartiality, the attendance policy should be publicized on an ongoing basis by announcing it at each meeting as well as including it in the handbook.

When creating an attendance policy, the following considerations should be addressed:

- Number of absences that will be allowed for the Inn year
- Use of excused absences and the difference between excused and unexcused absences
- Action that will be required of the member in the event of excused and unexcused absences
- Financial implications for the Inn, with an example being Inns that have a “pay-as-you-go” policy may lose money when members cancel for a dinner meeting
- Role of guests. Some Inns require that an absent member send a guest in his/her place; and, finally,
- Who will enforce the policy and how the policy will be enforced.

A sample Attendance Policy can be found under related resources.