



2026 AEP CONFERENCE SESSION ABSTRACTS

Sunday, March 1 - 9:00am - Keynote Presentation

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
Keynote	TCC Ballroom	Adam Rosen, Associate Vice President, Office of Cultural Relations and University Events	Scaling Impact: Developing a Strategy to Build a Robust Internal Events Team	<p>As colleges and universities go through leadership changes and organizational adjustments, so does the need for effective internal events that drive messaging, engagement, culture, and alignment. In his keynote presentation, Adam Rosen explores how to strategically scale and expand your internal events function, from building a strong team structure to aligning with business goals. Learn best practices for staffing, budgeting, cross-functional collaboration, leadership commitment, and measuring success, all aimed at maximizing the impact of your internal event offerings. Whether you're starting from scratch or expanding an existing team, you'll leave with actionable insights to build a scalable, high-performing internal events strategy.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Start with Strategy – Learn how to clearly articulate your event objectives and align them with institutional priorities to highlight both value and measurable impact; Build the Right Team – Identify key roles across production, programming, and design, and cultivate a collaborative culture that supports sustainable, long-term growth; Make the Case to Leadership – Discover how to leverage data, success stories, and feedback from students, donors, alumni, and the community to demonstrate how expanded event offerings advance the university’s mission.</p>

Sunday, March 1 - 10:15am – Breakout Session 1

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
1A	The Forum	Avni Kansara, Director of Student Experiences, University of California, Berkeley	Designing Orientation with Purpose: Balancing Information and Connection in a Multi-Day MBA Welcome Experience	<p>Each fall, the Evening & Weekend MBA Program at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business welcomes over 360 new students. As Director of Student Experience, Avni Kansara is tasked with designing a three-day orientation that meets two essential yet often competing priorities: delivering critical information students need to succeed, while cultivating a strong sense of community from day one.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Balance Dual Goals: Successful large-scale orientation requires intentionally balancing two often-competing priorities: delivering essential, critical information (logistics, academics) and fostering a strong, immediate sense of community and belonging; Leverage Intentional Feedback: Use clear goal-setting and actively solicit and apply student feedback to refine and improve event design year-over-year. This ensures the program remains relevant and truly student-centered; Design for Engagement: Move beyond information dumps. Employ thoughtful event design using strategies similar to the ones the EW MBA Program employs to create experiences that are both highly informative and deeply engaging, leading to higher yield and greater long term impact.</p>
1B	Rosen Room	Karie O’Neill, Associate Director, University Events, University of Delaware	Strategic Storytelling on the Road: The Journey of Delaware to the World	<p>In 2018, the University of Delaware launched a bold, national tour to extend the momentum of its campaign and connect with alumni and stakeholders across the country. What began as an ambitious concept evolved into a strategic, 15-city event series that showcased the university’s worldwide research, celebrated alumni pride, and brought the spirit of campus nationwide. This session takes attendees behind the scenes of building a scalable, brand-consistent model while navigating tight timelines, shifting priorities, and complex collaboration. Ideal for advancement, alumni, marketing, and event professionals seeking practical insights and inspiration for creating high-impact, multi-city engagement initiatives.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: From Vision to Roadmap–Discover how an ambitious idea became a coast-to-coast engagement tour while balancing creativity, logistics, and strategy to bring the university’s story to life; Collaboration through Complexity–Learn practical ways to navigate shifting priorities, leadership input, and cross-departmental coordination while keeping your project on course; Scalable</p>

				Storytelling That Connects -Explore how to craft a consistent, authentic brand experience that resonates across cities, audiences, and platforms while turning events into lasting connections.
1C	Tommy's Place	Tyger Glauser Nicholas, Manager of Special Events and University Protocol, University of Tennessee, Knoxville	More Than Just Scissors and Shovels: Planning Meaningful Groundbreaking and Dedication Ceremonies	<p>Planning a groundbreaking or dedication ceremony is more than just the scissors or shovels - it's an opportunity to honor the purpose behind the new space and the people who made it possible. In this session, participants will get a behind-the-scenes look at how to create ceremonies that are memorable for leadership, stakeholders, and guests. With over 30 groundbreakings and dedications under her belt, Tyger will walk participants through the entire planning process, including sharing the worksheet she uses when collaborating with campus partners and photos from past ceremonies to inspire them to think creatively about their own institutional events.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Participants will learn about one university's groundbreaking and dedication ceremonies to think creatively about their own ceremonies; Participants will receive an example planning worksheet that they can modify for their own events; Participants will learn from the presenter's successes and challenges in event planning to influence their future planning.</p>

Sunday, March 1 - 11:30am – General Session

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
General Session	TCC Ballroom	Matthew Regan, Director, Advancement Events at Emerson College and Briana Silvio, Owner, Elevated Impressions	Bridging the Gap: Vendor Partnerships That Make the Grade	<p>To successfully execute major campus events, effective collaboration between internal teams and external vendors is crucial. Too often, poor communication or misunderstood institutional protocol leads to stress and issues. This co-taught session will offer perspectives from both sides. Seasoned vendor Briana Silvio will explain how vendors navigate the academic landscape, covering everything from insurance and payment to onboarding. Experienced academic event professional Matthew Regan will detail what institutions need from partners to ensure adherence to internal policies, branding, and risk management standards.</p> <p>They will use real examples and checklists to facilitate a discussion on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What institutions need to collect from vendors • What vendors need to know from institutions • Hiring red flags and green lights • Building long-term partnerships

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools for effective communication <p>Session Takeaways: Understand the most common breakdowns in vendor–institution relationships and how to prevent them; Know exactly what documentation and communication is expected from both sides; Walk away with tools and templates to streamline vendor onboarding and management; Gain insights into creating a vendor-friendly yet policy-compliant institutional framework.</p>
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Sunday, March 1 - 1:30pm – Breakout Session 2

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
2A	The Forum	Kyla Dunn, Director of Events, Engagement and Outreach, and Liz Ronecker, Sr. Event Coordinator, College of Arts and Science, University of Missouri	From Classrooms to Center Stage: Integrating Student Work into Signature Events	<p>This session explores how to highlight creative work and research across disciplines at events. Using the Chancellor’s Arts Showcase and Arts After Hour as examples, which feature music, architectural studies, museums, visual studies, and textile and apparel management will demonstrate strategies for integrating campus talent into programming. Participants will gain practical tips for planning interdisciplinary events, fostering collaboration, building partnerships, and empower students as active contributors to academic and creative communities.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Framework for designing collaborative academic events; Strategies for engaging student and faculty talents across disciplines; Tips on collaboration on large scale events.</p>
2B	Rosen Room	Jordan Brantley-Prewitt, Senior Director of Athletic Events and Partnerships, University of Tennessee, Knoxville	The Life of a Tailgate: Creating Impactful Athletic Events from Start to Finish	<p>From pre-game planning to post-game gratitude, The Life of a Tailgate takes you behind the scenes of collegiate athletic events that inspire fans and strengthen community connections. This session explores the full event lifecycle — from sponsorship integration and vendor coordination to volunteer management and on-site execution. Learn how to balance logistics with creativity, build lasting partnerships, and create experiences that elevate school spirit while delivering measurable impact. Whether you’re new to event management or a seasoned professional, you’ll walk away with practical strategies to take your game day events to the next level.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Learn best practices for managing sponsorships, vendors, and volunteers at high-volume athletic events; Discover creative ways to enhance fan</p>

				engagement and strengthen donor or partner relationships; Gain practical tools for streamlining event logistics while maintaining brand consistency and guest experience.
2C	Tommy's Place	Doneshia Webster, Student Affairs Event Manager, UNC Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health	Building a Bridge: Gen Z and the New Rules of Engagement	<p>Today's students think, communicate, and connect differently—and higher ed has to keep up. This session explores how to authentically engage Gen Z by understanding their values, communication styles, and what truly drives their participation. Through real examples and insights from the lens of a younger Student Affairs professional, we'll unpack how generational awareness can transform campus programming and student involvement. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for meeting students where they are, building trust, and creating experiences that feel relevant, inclusive, and impactful in today's evolving higher education landscape.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Understand Gen Z's mindset-Learn what drives engagement for today's students and how their values shape communication and connection; Bridge the generational gap-Explore strategies to align traditional institutional approaches with modern student expectations; Engage with authenticity-Discover practical ways to create programming that feels relevant, inclusive, and meaningful to the current generation.</p>

Sunday, March 1 - 2:45pm - Breakout Session 3

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
3A	The Forum	Rowan Halliday, Events Program Coordinator, Hildebrand Department of Petroleum and Geosystems Engineering, The University of Texas at Austin	Offsite Contingency: Planning Event Safety When You're Not in Your Own Space	<p>Managing event safety is complex enough when we control all the variables, but when we travel for events we may find ourselves without resources we're used to having. Building an Events Kit, performing a site assessment, and advance planning for emergencies become even more important when you take the show on the road. I'll walk you through some simple but effective safety strategies to help you feel confident and get ready for any remote event, from luxury resorts to primitive campsites.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: A well-stocked Events Kit customized to your location and needs is essential; A site safety and accessibility assessment is a powerful tool for event readiness; You can't plan for everything, but you can be ready for anything.</p>

3B	Rosen Room		Sponsor Discovery	A Deep Dive into Products that Shape Academic Events. Sponsors: 42 Chat, SpotMyPhotos, Cutting Edge Success, Cvent
3C	Tommy's Place	Laurel Belman, Event Manager, University of Wisconsin, Madison	Do More of the Work You Want, and Less of What Overwhelms You	<p>I used to do it all, from showing up to push the record button to multi-day conferences. Overworked and overwhelmed, learn how I'm moving toward less doing and more consulting in order to free me up to work on the events that make the most of my time and expertise. I'll outline why this strategy is an advantage, explain my strategy and I'll share examples of the documentation I've created to support consulting such as: 1) Event management services - what I do and what I don't, 2) Event Proposal Form, 3) New Events proposals, 4) Event Kits.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: How to create a clear process for working with you ; How to set expectations and help people you work with show up more prepared; How to delegate to others- help them do more and you less; How to improve efficiency by building resources and tools.</p>

Sunday, March 1 - 4pm - Breakout Session 4

SESSION	ROOM	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
4A	The Forum	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Small Institutions (Up to 6,000 students)
4B	Rosen Room	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Medium Institutions (6,000 - 20,000 students)
4C	Tommy's Place	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Large Institutions (20,000+ students)
4D	TCC Ballroom	Institution Sized Open Discussion	C-Suite (For event managers or directors with 8+ years' experience)

Monday, March 2 - 9:30am - Breakout Session 1

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
1A	The Forum	Jihan Lang, Director, Institutional Advancement and Campaign Events, Spelman College	Making the Moment Matter: Storytelling Techniques to Elevate Academic Events	<p>What makes an event memorable isn't just the food or décor—it's the story it tells. This session teaches academic planners how to embed compelling narratives into events of all sizes. Using techniques from theatre, brand marketing, and donor stewardship, this session will explore how to identify your institution's unique voice and express it through staging, scripting, visuals, and guest experiences. Even with modest resources, powerful storytelling can turn ordinary programming into extraordinary memory-making.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Framework for identifying and articulating event narratives aligned with institutional goals; Low-cost, high-impact storytelling techniques using space, symbols, and ceremony; Case studies on how storytelling improved engagement and donor affinity.</p>
1B	Rosen Room	Matthew Redd, Former Director of Commencement and Special Events, Vanderbilt University	Marketing and Communication Ideas to Improve Your Campus Events - A Case Study from Vanderbilt's Commencement	<p>Looking for fresh ideas to elevate your student and guest experience? In this fast-paced and engaging session, we'll explore a case study of Vanderbilt University's commencement and break down a multi-layered approach to improving communication and engagement before, during, and after major campus events. You'll walk away with practical strategies you can immediately apply to commencement, orientations, or any campus gathering. Come ready to ask questions, share insights, and leave inspired with actionable solutions to enhance every stage of the event journey.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Walk away with ready-to-use ideas to immediately improve the student and guest experience at your institution. How to leverage community partners to spread your message and make communication easier. Creative techniques to display your brand and make recognizing your messaging easier.</p>
1C	Tommy's Place	Rachel Ash, Associate Director, Office of University Events,	The Best Laid Plans...and the Political Landmines	<p>With the political landscape playing such a prominent role in our day-to-day lives, it is reasonable to expect that it would influence how we plan our events. But when that planning starts months before election night, the trickle-down effect quickly turns into a downpour. In this session, we will look at what happened when a group of students and successful alumni, sponsored by the Men of Color Success Network, the Women of Color</p>

		Colgate University		<p>Network, and the Alumni of Color Organization, gathered for the second annual Convergence Leadership Summit in New York City. Discover the unexpected challenges and political obstacles that needed to be overcome for attendees to have a seamless experience, as well as the valuable lessons learned.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: How to anticipate the unforeseen by creating a flexible crisis framework. Realizing the ultimate metric of internal success is the attendee experience. How to emphasize the institution's values, while remaining neutral in communications.</p>
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Monday, March 2 - 10:45am - General Session

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
General Session	TCC Ballroom	Jim Hooker, Executive Director, Academic Programs at TSEC Academic Solutions; Jill Townsend, Executive Director Special Events and Protocol at University of California - San Diego; Melissa Goitia, Executive Director of University Ceremonies at Arizona State University	RFP's: The Key to Your Success...or Your Biggest Nightmare	<p>Issuing an RFP (Request for Proposal) is a stressful process. Writing the proposal, knowing your exact needs, and working closely with your colleagues in procurement to fully comprehend your vision can oftentimes feel overwhelming. But it is vital to understand that a close partnership with your internal procurement department to source vendors for your events is a detailed process that can greatly enhance or derail your event goals. Ultimately, it comes down to clear, concise communication and mutual respect. This session will explore this often-maligned process. Those of us who work in events understand that all vendors are not the same, especially when sourcing creative talent for design, original film/video production, lighting, entertainment, strategy, and implementation. Some companies simply have more robust talent. But how do you issue an RFP that allows you to leverage your creative needs against the "lowest bid" mentality that often exists within academic institutions? Our presenters, with over 70 years of combined academic event experience, will offer various examples on how to approach an RFP, and how to maximize the results. We will demonstrate how a poorly thought-through RFP can potentially undermine your entire event, causing cost overages and unfulfilled concepts.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: Think before you write: To get your intended results, work closely with your procurement office to clarify what you really need before you issue an RFP. Budget is the key: Don't ask for everything, because you will end up</p>

with less than you expected. **Focus on the results:** Recognize value-added items and think beyond this single event.

Monday, March 2 - 1:00pm – Breakout Session 2

SESSION	ROOM	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
2A	The Forum	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Small Institutions (Up to 6,000 students)
2B	Rosen Room	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Medium Institutions (6,000 - 20,000 students)
2C	Tommy's Place	Institution Sized Open Discussion	Large Institutions (20,000+ students)
2D	TCC Ballroom	Institution Sized Open Discussion	C-Suite (For event managers or directors with 8+ years' experience)

Monday, March 2 - 2:15pm – Breakout Session 3

SESSION	ROOM	SPEAKER(S)	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
3A	The Forum	Missy Arendash, Director of Events & Engagement, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, William F. Harrah College of Hospitality	Engage, Inspire, Enroll: Building the Camp that Converts Student Curiosity into Commitment	Traditional outreach methods often fall flat with today's students—but what if you could reimagine recruitment as an immersive, high-touch experience? This session explores how UNLV's Harrah College of Hospitality designed a four-day immersive summer camp that engaged high school students through movement-based activities, industry exposure, and campus connection. You'll learn how a modest budget, a clear vision, and the right collaborators helped turn curiosity into commitment—and how you can adapt the model to fit your institution's goals. Session Takeaways: Learn how to design immersive, hands-on programming that inspires prospective students and elevates your institution's brand; Discover strategies to execute high-impact events on limited budgets through cross-campus collaboration and creative partnerships; Walk away with actionable tools—including sample agendas, team structure tips, and programming ideas—to reimagine your own outreach and recruitment efforts.
3B	Rosen Room		Sponsor Discovery	A Deep Dive into Products that Shape Academic Events. Sponsors: BBJ La Tavola, StageClip, TSEC Academic Solutions, LA Photo Party, LiveWhale Calendar
3C	Tommy's Place	Jessi Raymond, Outreach and Marketing	From Chaos to Clarity: Applying	Planning events in higher education often involves shifting timelines, multiple stakeholders, and competing priorities. Applying project management principles can provide structure, alignment, and strategic clarity. In this

	Coordinator, University of Nevada - Reno, School of Medicine and Rebecca Rumbaugh, Manager, Events and Protocol, University of Nevada - Reno, School of Medicine	Project Management Principles to Academic Events	<p>session, the Events and Protocol Team at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine (UNR Med) will share how they've implemented a project management framework across their academic event cycle—from commencement and white coat ceremonies to employee appreciation events and VIP visits. Whether you're managing a single large-scale event or overseeing a year-round event calendar, this session will offer actionable tools and strategies to strengthen event planning operations across your institution.</p> <p>Session Takeaways: A customizable project charter template to define event scope, timelines, responsibilities, and deliverables; Strategies for gaining leadership buy-in through documentation, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and early alignment; Tool suggestions for task delegation, workflow management, and transparency.</p>
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Monday, March 2 - 3:30pm - General Session

SESSION	ROOM	TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
General Session	TCC Ballroom	AEP Power Hour	It's your turn to ask the questions and provide the answers in this open discussion on all things academic events.