

Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Unconference Planning

Annalise Janke
Administrative Project Manager, Center on Rural Engagement
Indiana University Bloomington

While this segment is typically reserved for students, as a recent graduate and future law student, I believe that my proximity to student life offers a valuable perspective.

I joined the Center for Rural Engagement as the team's administrative project manager just days after my graduation in May 2023. It wasn't long before I heard of the looming "Unconference" event that I would help plan.

Initially, I was quite skeptical of the idea. In true Gen-Z fashion, I am used to relying on email, Zoom, and other forms of internet connection to bridge gaps. Much of my university experience, including my first day of freshman year, was spent in a Zoom classroom. Before too long, however, I began to see the need for an Unconference.

The breadth and reach of Indiana University is part of its beauty, but it can be overly Byzantine, too. Local campuses can feel disconnected and sometimes even rivalrous. There is a lack of a sense of unity and connectedness between campuses, units, departments, and even titles.

As a student, I was hardly cognizant of my fellow IU peers outside of Bloomington. Some departments and programs do a far better job at ensuring connection between geographic campuses, but overall, IU is lacking in this area. As a professional staff member, there can feel like an invisible wall between faculty and staff.

At the Unconference, all bets are off. From the very first planning stages, there is no hierarchy of importance, no pecking order. Of course, the experience that comes with time and achievement cannot and should not be ignored, but the Unconference celebrates the expertise and importance of each member regardless of title.

Looking around the room filled wall-to-wall with university members from many different walks of life, it was incredible to see the diversity of conversation and input. Watching folks from different campuses compare their experiences brought shared struggles to light, and interdisciplinary conversations led to some very creative ideas, including concocting a rich metaphor likening the Unconference work to dating.



Aside from the brilliant conversations that arose naturally from Unconference attendees, the programming of the event tackled difficult issues in a way I admired. Susan Sciame-Giesecke spoke on her prior experience leading a regional campus. She addressed the struggles and the strengths of regional campuses with refreshing honesty.

Dr. Sciame-Giesecke also spoke on the power that each of us have to impact the incredibly bureaucratic system that we exist within at IU in a way that encouraged and inspired the audience. Phaedra Corso discussed research at IU, which resulted in a passionate discussion on IU's blind spot toward community engaged research and a need for true change, communication, and transparency. I left the Unconference feeling refreshed and energized, which I believe should be the goal of every conference event. Watching my colleagues connect, ideate, and advance their positions inspires me to do the same.

While I am not actively engaging in community based research or directly working in communities, I support a team of incredible people who do, and in my future legal career, community-engaged work is of the utmost importance to me. I am grateful for the space the Unconference created for folks to connect without the barrier of a screen. The laughter and stories shared at the in-person sessions cultivated a familiarity that enriched the traditional Zoom meetings that continued on the next week.

Now more than ever, it is important for us to create spaces to connect across silos in person and online. I am thankful to have been a part of the Unconference, and I'm excited to begin working on its next iteration—the Statewide Indiana University Community Engaged Institute.

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