

# Event Planning Tips & Best Practices

Lessons experienced chapter leaders wish they'd known from day one — organized by what actually matters, not by a planning timeline.

## Start With the Outcome, Not the Activity

Before you pick a date or venue, decide what success looks like. Ask: what do we want people to feel, learn, or do differently afterward? A panel and a reception can share a topic but serve entirely different goals — one builds knowledge, the other builds relationships. Naming the outcome first tells you the right format, guest list, and room setup.

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*Pro Tip: Write your outcome in one sentence before you touch a calendar. If you can't, you're not ready to plan yet.*

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## Choosing the Right Event Format

Every format has a different rhythm, room setup, and success measure. Pick the one that fits your outcome, not the one that's easiest to plan. Match the format to the goal:

- Educate → panel discussion or expert briefing
- Build community → reception or alumni networking event
- Celebrate → cultural celebration or recognition gathering
- Mobilize → advocacy event or service project
- Recruit → info session paired with a welcome reception
- Reconnect → returning scholar panel or international education week program

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*Pro Tip: A smaller, well-run event builds more chapter credibility than a large, thinly-planned one.*

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## Building Partnerships

Embassies, universities, and local nonprofits are often more willing to co-host than chapters expect — a shared event cuts everyone's workload and reaches audiences no single organization could reach alone. Lead with a specific ask (“Would you co-host and provide the venue?”) rather than an open one (“Want to collaborate sometime?”). Specific asks get answered; vague ones get shelved.

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*Common Mistake: Contacting a university international office or embassy cultural affairs contact less than 6-8 weeks out. Institutional partners need lead time for internal approvals.*

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## Setting Realistic Attendance Expectations

Plan around confirmed RSVPs, not general interest. A reliable rule of thumb: expect 60-75% of RSVPs to actually show up. Use this quick conversion when setting your target:

| Want | Register         |
|------|------------------|
| 20   | 28 - 33 people   |
| 40   | 55 - 65 people   |
| 60   | 80 - 100 people  |
| 100  | 135 - 165 people |

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*Pro Tip: Book a room for your realistic number, not your hoped-for number. An empty-feeling room does more damage than a full, modest one.*

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## Keeping Volunteers Engaged

Assign responsibilities to individual volunteers rather than asking for general help. People say yes far more often to a specific, bounded role (“Can you manage check-in from 6:00-6:30?”) than to a vague one (“Can you help out?”). Give every volunteer a role, a time window, and one point of contact.

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*Common Mistake: Recruiting volunteers the week of the event. Ask 3-4 weeks out and reconfirm 1 week out.*

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## Making Events Welcoming

First-time attendees decide whether to come back within the first 10 minutes. Station a greeter at the door, use name tags, and make sure at least one board member is actively introducing newcomers rather than clustering with people they already know.

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*Pro Tip: Ask a returning Fulbrighter or alum to help welcome newcomers — a warm peer introduction outperforms any greeting from the podium.*

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## Avoiding Common Planning Mistakes

Most problems trace back to a decision made weeks earlier. Commons issues include:

- Locking a date before checking for conflicts (holidays, academic calendars, other chapter events)
- Choosing a venue before confirming capacity, AV needs, and accessibility
- Sending one invitation instead of a reminder sequence
- Planning content but not room flow — where people enter, mingle, sit, and exit
- Not naming one point person for day-of decisions
- Skipping a rain/backup plan for outdoor or off-site programs

## Increasing Attendance

Attendance often increases significantly when registrants get reminders one week and one day before the event — build both into your plan from the start. A personal note from a board member consistently outperforms a mass email alone. Cross-promote through partner organizations' networks, not just your own list.

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*Pro Tip: A short, specific subject line (“You’re invited: Diplomat Panel, Thurs 6pm”) outperforms a generic one (“Upcoming Chapter Event”).*

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## Day-of-Event Success

Arrive 60-90 minutes early for setup and a full run-through with anyone speaking. Designate one person to handle real-time problems (tech, late guests, room changes) so the lead can stay focused on the program.

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*Common Mistake: The event lead trying to run the room and troubleshoot problems at the same time. Split those roles ahead of time.*

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## Following Up Afterward

Send a thank-you within 48 hours — to attendees, speakers, and partners separately, each tailored to their role. Capture what worked and what didn't while it's fresh; a 10-minute debrief with your planning team is worth more than a memory six months later.

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*Pro Tip: Ask 2-3 attendees directly for feedback rather than relying only on a survey — response rates on post-event surveys are typically low.*

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## Countdown Checklist: What to Do When

| When            | Do This                                                                                            |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8 weeks out     | Confirm outcome, format, date, venue, and any institutional partners (embassy, university office). |
| 6 weeks out     | Confirm speakers or program content; assign volunteer roles.                                       |
| 4 weeks out     | Open registration; recruit remaining volunteers with specific roles.                               |
| 2 weeks out     | Send first reminder; confirm AV, catering, and accessibility needs.                                |
| 1 week out      | Send second reminder; reconfirm volunteers and speakers.                                           |
| 1 day out       | Send final reminder; print materials; confirm day-of point person.                                 |
| Day of          | Arrive 60-90 minutes early; run through the program once.                                          |
| Within 48 hours | Send tailored thank-yous; hold a 10-minute team debrief.                                           |