

Team Building Exercises for College Students



Not all team building activities are created equal. Some exercises will be more successful with college students than others. The key is to find a balance between fun and purpose.

Things to Remember:

- Be mindful of the backgrounds of the team members. Celebrate the diversity of the students and be aware of cultural or personal restrictions to touching, personal space and other factors that may influence the activities you choose.
- Choose activities that will challenge students but not impose undue anxiety on them. Be conscious of phobias, mental health conditions, life experiences and personality traits that may affect students' participation. Stay flexible and allow students to participate at a level where they feel comfortable.
- Plan activities that are inclusive of all students' physical and mental abilities.
- Review activities thoroughly before facilitating them. Make sure you have all the necessary materials and that the training space is large enough for the exercise.
- Establish a "contract" with the team. The facilitator and every participant should agree to some basic rules, such as inclusion, safety, challenge by choice and 100 percent participation. Students understand they will not be forced to do the activity, but they can join the group by encouraging the others and mentally participating in the exercise.

One of the most effective types of team building activity is one in which you present the team with a problem or situation and ask them to solve it within a given set of rules and the materials you provide. Here are some tips for facilitating these exercises:

1. **Frame the activity.** When possible, frame your activities with a metaphor or story to increase the team's ability to transfer knowledge from the activity back to their role as student volunteer leaders (SVLs).
2. **Lead the activity.** One of the standard rules of team building is that, if teams make a mistake, they must start over. However, this can lead to major frustration. Instead, offer teams a choice: starting over or continuing with "something new and wonderful." If the group chooses "new and wonderful," the facilitator can be very creative in establishing new parameters. For example, team members who talk the most can lose their

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ability to speak, team members can be tied together, all but one team member must close their eyes, etc. Just remember to always keep safety in mind!

3. **Process the activity.** Lead the group in a time of reflection to emphasize how to use past experiences in making future decisions and achieve desired results. *Learning resulting from the experience is of greater significance than the nature of the experience itself.*

Outlined below are some team building ideas that have been used with or suggested by college students.

Your Name

Ask people to give their full name and tell why they were given or chose that name. This may introduce cultural definitions, family stories and other important folklore. You might learn some interesting facts about people in this exercise. It also helps in remembering people's names!

Personality Profile

Ask students to complete a personality assessment (e.g., Myers-Brigg, True Colors, etc.). Then divide students into their personality groups. Have each group complete a short assignment—answering a set of questions, planning a mock vacation, organizing a social event, etc. Then bring the students back together and process how each personality group worked together and what they learned about their strengths and weaknesses on a team.

You may also choose to create small groups comprising each personality type. Assign them another task, and then have the large group reflect on how the different personalities work together and what the implications are for their SVL team.

Group Juggle

Ask one person to come forward and try to juggle three balls. Keep adding balls until the team member can't juggle any more. Then have the entire team form a circle. Toss the ball to someone across the circle, first calling his or her name. When that person catches the ball, he or she must say "Thanks" and the name of the person that threw the ball. Ask participants to remember the order in which they pass the ball, as they will have to repeat it later. After everyone has had the ball, ask the participants to repeat the order again to be sure they remember. After

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completing this task, do it again, but this time, introduce more balls into the circle (if possible, one ball for every person). Have the group see how fast they can pass just one ball through the circle. Encourage them to “think outside the box.”

When they think they are as fast as possible, process the activity. Ask the team to consider what happened, what worked, what helped them improve and what barriers they faced. Also ask the single juggler to discuss the difference between trying to handle all the balls alone versus with the group. How does this relate to volunteerism and serving as a volunteer leader?

The Continuum

Use tape or chalk to mark a line that will serve as “The Continuum.” Ask the group a series of questions, each with two options, and ask students to answer by standing on “The Continuum.” For example, you might ask students if they are introverted or extroverted. Someone who thinks she is totally extroverted would stand at the end of “The Continuum,” while someone who considers himself both introverted and extroverted would stand somewhere in the middle.

The list of possible questions is endless and can be tailored for each group. Begin with simple, nonthreatening questions (“Where would you rather go for vacation—the mountains or the beach?”) to help the group get to know students’ personalities, communication styles, etc. As the trust level rises, progress to deeper questions that can reveal more about students’ backgrounds, beliefs and thoughts about specific issues. To deepen the learning experience, ask students to explain why they are at a certain point on “The Continuum.”

Boasting

It is hard to get people to talk about their past . . . particularly the stuff that is very good. We have all been conditioned not to brag. If this is a new group, ask everyone to write down three things about themselves of which they are proud. Ask them to share those three things with one other person. Then ask everyone to get up and go around the room boasting. The recipient of the boast then responds positively. After the exercise, process with these questions:

- How did it feel?
- Were some people easier to share with than others?
- How did you share? Were you proud, tentative, embarrassed?

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- Did you believe what you were saying?
- How did people react to you?
- How are you feeling now?

If the group members know each other, restructure this exercise and suggest that they write down responses to the following five questions and then follow the same format.

Questions used might include:

- What is the grandest accomplishment of the organization?
- What difficult issue have you been wrestling with in the past six months?
- What positive benefits do you receive from this group?
- What are you doing best right now?
- What troubles you when you think of this group?

Chairs: Collaboration Versus Competition

This is a visual way of helping groups see how collaboration and competition affect group goal accomplishment. Ask the group to break into two. This is a silent activity, so there should be no talking. Ask one group to arrange the chairs into rows, and ask the other group to arrange the chairs into a circle. Watch them set off to do their task. In the end, the group either competes within itself or finds a way to collaborate to form the chairs into rows, a circle or a new form. Process this for the experience and for the deeper meaning.

Group Values

Ask team members to individually come up with the values of the group. Then break into small groups. Give each group newsprint and markers, and ask them to draw a picture that might be used in a magazine or newspaper to advertise your group . . . focusing on the values. Ask groups to share their ads with the larger team. Process the activity by asking the group to discuss recurring themes or possible contradictions. You may choose to use this activity to develop an agreed-upon set of values and expectations that will guide the team's work.

Sources: Some of this material was adapted from Rochester Community and Technical College's Team Building Project (www.rctc.edu); Lee Scripture & John Batey, "Now What," 2006 Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Leader Forum; and Davidson College (www2.davidson.edu/studentlife/involved/pcourt/pcourt_docs/Mgmt_TeamBldgIdeas.pdf).
<http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/online-courses/engaging-college-students-as-volunteer-leaders>