



Welcome, belong, stay:

Student employees reimaging campus life

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ABSTRACT

We have one big challenge: getting students back on campus and helping them feel that campus is more than just a classroom. After the pandemic, we noticed how many first-year students struggled to find their place—socially and academically. That inspired our project: Campus Hosts.

With this project we have established a team of student employees capable of developing and enriching campus life. They work both hands-on and behind the scenes when establishing spaces for informal networks and academic engagement, such as organizing festivals on campus and developing social student areas.

Keywords: student-staff collaboration, sense of belonging, student engagement, campus life, learning community

The context

Student employees serving as Campus Hosts are essential liaisons between full-time university staff and student volunteers; by creating welcoming spaces and low-threshold activities throughout the academic year, they help build spaces and informal networks that increase belonging and campus vitality.

As staff working in the learning environment at the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities at NTNU, Norway, we observed a worrying pattern: students who don't connect drift, feel invisible, skip campus, and some ultimately drop out. Rebuilding a 'sticky campus' is therefore not merely a strategic response to decreased foot traffic on campus but it is also a commitment to belonging. We have the ambition to make our campus a place students want to be, not just a place they have to be, and as Zwolak et al. (2018) claims, we also believe that informal social networks drive deeper educational commitment.

That insight inspired our initiative: Campus Hosts.

Their role is practical and relational. They set up low-threshold activities on campus for first-year students with the goal of giving these fresher students a reason to stay at campus and not go home between lectures. As Matthews et al. (2011) points out, students learn through interactions with peers in spaces where they feel a sense of belonging. But those spaces don't magically appear, they need to be hosted, maintained, and made welcoming, and that's exactly where Campus Hosts come in.

Small et al. (2017) found that how students spend their time in that crucial first year predicts their involvement in high-impact activities later, such as leadership roles or internships. Since those early touchpoints really matter, our initiative is supposed to facilitate meaningful interactions between students. Zwolak et al. (2018) who showed that out-of-class networks are crucial for students' persistence, therefore

emphasize the importance of ‘informal social networks’ to avoid attrition and contribute to students’ academic success. Student employees help seeding those networks. They do not lead from the front, but by making sure that there’s space (and snacks) for students to show up, hang out, and connect.

Student associations and societies are great at building community within specific study programs or specific areas of interest. Student volunteers jump in wherever there’s energy and passion, fuelling everything from one-off events to bigger initiatives. Campus Hosts, though, fill the space between these volunteer activities and more formal student organizations. Rather than being seen as competitors, they act as supporters and facilitators, helping to strengthen the overall student community of our faculties and to organize activities across associations and disciplines.

One of our student employees described this in the following way:

I’ve noticed we fill a really different space. Our intention is that nobody falls through the cracks. We organize daytime events that don’t require you to already know someone to show up. And maybe most importantly, we work across all the silos – between study programs, between student organizations, between the university and other campus services. Our job is often behind-the-scenes, when we make sure that informal student spaces such as the student lounge isn’t just a place with furniture, but a space where you can land between lectures.

An example of activities that our Campus Hosts organize are daytime festivals which often coincide with the changing of the seasons. One such example is the Campus Days at the end of the Spring semester. The format is a festival that starts on May 1st and runs through the lead-up to summer closure. The festival coincides with the exam and reading weeks for students in Norway and is intentionally easy to join. It features decorations, pop-up concerts and talks, light sport activities and free food and drinks for students studying on campus. Importantly, the Campus Hosts partner with the university library to run “shut up and write” and focused study sessions. This combines social atmosphere and academic support to give students another reason to remain on campus during critical study periods. Research suggests that with student engagement and more time spent on campus, the better the students perform both academically and socially (Matthews et al., 2011; Small et al., 2017; Zwolak et al., 2018).

Another example is campus development and establishing new student spaces. In spring 2024 Campus Hosts played a central role in identifying the need for a dedicated student association space. Their daily presence and practical know-how helped staff and volunteers design and implement a visible, accessible room for meetings, events, and informal collaboration. This was not merely furnishing a room, but it was about recognizing the importance of student-driven initiatives and co-creating a student-driven hub that lowers barriers for cross-organizational activity. We wanted to encourage ownership among student groups and give them the tools they needed to develop an idea that was feasible. Therefore, we regard this co-led project as transformative since the aim was not ‘doing things right’, but ‘doing the right things differently’.

By taking on operational and outreach responsibilities, student employees make it possible for full-time staff to focus on strategic development and targeted student support. The collaboration is mutually beneficial: staff contribute with institutional knowledge and continuity, and student employees contribute with peer insight and day-to-day campus perspectives. This partnership fosters trust, shared ownership, and openness to experimentation. By sharing each other’s perspectives and involving students actively in what is done and how it is done, initiatives come to life that reflect real needs and foster the sense of belonging. Small interventions such as a well-timed coffee cart or an expertly promoted pop-up can translate into

increased presence, new peer relations, and more robust informal networks that support academic persistence.

Perhaps most importantly, being a Campus Host fosters a deep sense of belonging, knowledge and ownership of campus. Combined with their practical know-how, this makes them proactive and capable contributors to developing a more vibrant and welcoming campus environment.

If you are considering a similar initiative at your institution here are some key learning points from us that can be helpful to consider when you are establishing a similar student employee team:

- **Structure and onboarding:** Invest in thorough onboarding, define scope, offer clear role descriptions, and regular team meetings to establish norms, best practices and clear communication. Equip them with templates, budgets, and workshop skills so they can operate confidently.
- **Networking:** Introduce Campus Hosts broadly – not only to leadership but to the everyday operational staff (library, maintenance, cleaning, dining services, gardening). These relationships are often crucial for logistics and coproduction of activities, and these connections multiply their effectiveness.
- **Autonomy and trust:** Give the Campus Hosts freedom to propose and decide on activities and trust their student perspective. Encourage experimentation with low risk, high reach events that don't require prior social ties to attend.
- **Regular maintenance duties:** Include weekly maintenance and activation tasks so social spaces remain welcoming and visible. This fosters campus ownership in the team, increases practical know-how and further strengthens ties to everyday operational staff.
- **Budget for light logistics:** A small fund for refreshments, printing and micro equipment (speakers, decorations) unlocks many activities.
- **Management:** The role of the leader is essential for managing the student employees, but also for facilitating pathways between hosts, student volunteers, associations, and university decisionmakers so successful initiatives can scale or be institutionalized.
- **Mentorship and turn-over:** Try to retain some members of the staff between academic years so more experienced Campus Hosts can translate lived experience into recommendations and provide smoother onboarding of new Campus Hosts. Don't be afraid of turn-over. This can give the team a chance for fresh perspectives.
- **Measure both quantitative and qualitative impact:** Track campus presence metrics (if possible) and collect stories and student feedback to capture effects on belonging and academic engagement.

Biographies

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Thomas Vikestad Kalvik works at the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, NTNU. Thomas has worked with the first-year experience (FYE) since 2014 and has led several initiatives to improve the FYE, including large and small-scale peer-mentoring programs, campus development and work to support student organizations. He is also the co-coordinator of BLINK Learning Hub at NTNU and is co-responsible for the Campus Host program. For correspondence use email thomas.v.kalvik@ntnu.no.

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