

# Celebration



Recognizing and honoring contributions, successes, accomplishments, and milestones

## Celebration Defined

The principle of *celebration* in organizing, engagement and equity work refers to statements, actions, and events that recognize individual or group contributions, successes, accomplishments, or milestones. While celebrations are common social activities, celebration—as a principle of organizing, engagement, and equity work—refers to intentional, purposeful, and strategic acts of celebration that can be used to achieve specific goals, such as building a stronger sense of togetherness, increasing team motivation, honoring cultural traditions, or creating opportunities for community outreach and networking.

### Discussion: Problematic Forms of Celebration

It is important to note that some forms of celebration may be well-intentioned but ultimately counterproductive strategies. For example, schools often host “multicultural” performances or festivals, dinners featuring international cuisines, or other events intended to celebrate, honor, or recognize cultural diversity in the community. While authentic cultural celebrations can be highly effective engagement activities, such events may also be characterized by exclusion, hypocrisy, tokenism, appropriation, or stereotyping.

For example, school leaders may organize a multicultural event without involving members of the school’s cultural communities in the planning process; activities and performances may feature ethnic stereotypes that are demeaning or offensive to certain groups; some participants may feel that their culture is being displayed or consumed without being appreciated or understood; or the event may only symbolically celebrate inclusivity while cultural groups in the school and community routinely suffer discrimination that goes largely undiscussed and unaddressed. In these cases, multicultural celebrations are more likely to alienate certain stakeholders than make them feel included.

→ For a related discussion, see [Organizing Engagement’s introduction to Equity Literacy](#) and [Paul Gorski’s essay on Taco Nights](#)

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

# Celebration Strategies

The following descriptions illustrate a few celebration strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Strengthening solidarity and teambuilding**
  2. **Keeping individuals and groups motivated**
  3. **Reaching new stakeholders and constituencies**
  4. **Creating opportunities for cross-cultural connections and networking**
  5. **Recognizing contributions and accomplishments**
  6. **Validating diverse individuals and groups**
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## 1. Strengthening solidarity and teambuilding

For centuries, humans have used celebrations—such as rituals, holidays, festivals, or singing—to promote social and cultural solidarity, and indeed intentional acts of celebration can help to strengthen group identity and cooperation, especially when participants come from different professional, socioeconomic, ideological, or cultural backgrounds.

- Celebrations can also amplify feelings of belonging, togetherness, or solidarity; positive emotions such as optimism and excitement; or a group's passion for and commitment to a cause.
- Integrating celebration, socializing, and other enjoyable activities into an organizing or engagement process can help to improve morale in organizations and teams by balancing work routines and obligations with reenergizing opportunities for socializing and relaxation.

## 2. Keeping individuals and groups motivated

Celebrations create opportunities for fun, amusement, entertainment, and recreation, which can help to reduce stress, tensions, anxieties, and other factors that can negatively affect morale, participation, or engagement. Even small acts of celebration—such as a congratulatory remark from colleagues—can be motivating to individuals and teams.

- In many cases, organizing, engagement, and equity work are attempting to address difficult problems, such as deeply entrenched patterns of bias in schools and communities.

Celebrations of progress, successes, and milestones, along with expressions of appreciation and gratitude, can help to keep teams, participants, and staff members motivated while they are engaging in difficult conversations or working to address challenging problems.

### **3. Reaching new stakeholders and constituencies**

Because enjoyable social events can be inviting to certain individuals and groups, such as those who are new to a school or community, celebrations can be an important component of an effective outreach and recruitment strategy.

- Celebratory events can attract community members who might be reluctant to attend more formal civic proceedings, such as a school-board or city-council meeting, or community members who might not know how to get involved in an engagement process or volunteer program. Block parties, cultural performances, and youth exhibitions are just a few activities that can attract people from diverse cultural backgrounds and social circumstances, which can then create opportunities for sharing information, extending invitations, or recruiting volunteers. During celebratory events, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can greet participants, staff information tables, distribute handouts, collect email addresses, solicit contributions, secure petition signatures, deliver presentations, and make personal connections with and introductions to community members.

### **4. Creating opportunities for cross-cultural connections and networking**

Celebrations present opportunities for relationship-building and networking, particularly among socially or culturally isolated groups that don't routinely interact. More specifically, networking strategies that aim to increase the voice, influence, or power of historically marginalized groups generally require a disruption of traditional social, cultural, political, or professional networks.

- When people are enjoying themselves in a celebratory atmosphere, they may be less guarded and more open to connecting with others, which can help participants overcome social and cultural divides that might otherwise present barriers to connection. Celebrations can create a non-threatening environment for formerly marginalized or disconnected groups to network with establishment leaders, such as school administrators, public officials, elected representatives, and influential patrons.

### **5. Recognizing contributions and accomplishments**

What gets celebrated in an organization, community, or culture indicates what is valued. Celebrations

present opportunities to recognize the contributions of individuals, groups, and organizations, which can focus attention on issues, causes, or cultural communities that tend to be disregarded or neglected.

- Many elements of organizing and engagement work do not receive public attention or accolades, and public acts of celebratory recognition can increase the visibility of organizing, engagement, or equity programs—visibility that may then attract attention from the media, for example, or from prospective sponsors, donors, and funders. An annual award program that recognizes valuable contributions to community service, civic volunteerism, or public education, for example, can bring attention to individuals and groups whose contributions have historically been overlooked or unheralded.
- Similarly, celebrations of particular cultural traditions, or cultural diversity generally, can counterbalance the celebratory traditions—and blind spots—of the dominant culture. In American public schools, for example, the school year is marked by religious holidays that are not observed by many students and families, and conventional celebratory activities may not represent the concerns, priorities, or traditions of many cultural communities—in fact, some celebratory traditions could be seen as biased or exclusionary. By integrating celebrations of cultural diversity into school programming, for example, acts of celebration can help to promote a more welcoming and inclusive school culture.

## **6. Validating diverse individuals and groups**

Celebrations can serve to validate the accomplishments of individuals and groups, especially those who are not customarily praised, recognized, or valued. Celebrations can therefore play an important role in legitimizing groups that have historically been professionally, politically, economically, or culturally marginalized.

- For example, employers and successful business executives are routinely celebrated in American communities, most commonly for their contributions to charity or local economic development. Yet individuals without wealth, social status, or political influence are far less likely to be celebrated, even if they are making valuable contributions—possibly at significant personal sacrifice—to their schools or communities. In these cases, intentional and strategic acts of celebration can be used to challenge social and cultural conventions that may disproportionately value, recognize, and praise the contributions of those with wealth, authority, status, or power.
- Celebrations can also be used to validate or certify individual accomplishments, such as the completion of a program that provides education in essential skills such as civic leadership, community organizing, group facilitation, public speaking, or youth and family advocacy. For example, training and leadership-development programs, such as “parent universities,” commonly host graduation ceremonies for family members who successfully complete a

training program.

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