

The Effects of Covid on College Events and Engagement

by

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Submitted to the Board of Arts Management

School of the Arts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College State University of New York

May 2021

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Introduction

Every year towards the end of spring thousands of Purchase College students gather within the grounds to celebrate the incoming ending to the school year with a yearly music festival. Formally known in the '80s as April Showers now very popularly known as Culture Shock. These two days of music, food, rides, and activities during the last days of April bring with it the beginning of spring and the ending of yet another academic year. Through the years Culture Shock has become a key feature for the college experience of all students at Purchase College however in the year 2020 this disappeared for all students.

In March of 2020 the world started to see the beginning stages of a global pandemic, with not only business and travel being shut down but also all colleges began to send students home, canceling classes and major events like this one in order to abide by the guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. College events weren't the only affected ones by this, but with time the arts have found ways to be present in everyone's home even with the pandemic still happening (Rice). Through my research I'll be observing the effect the pandemic has had on college events and engagement, specifically Purchase College's Culture Shock and how the college like many others has found ways to bring events, like Culture Shock, to students' homes.

SUNY Purchase College History

The State University at Purchase College was founded in 1967 by Governor Nelson Rockefeller, his vision for the campus consisted in a place where conservatory style classes met liberal arts and sciences classes. The campus of Purchase college was designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes and landscape by architect Peter Rolland with the idea to be seen as "the city

within the country” the *city side* being the academic buildings and the resident halls while the *countryside* actually being the rest of the land, we call purchase, including some of the courts for sporting events and the rest of the 500 acres of the rural land. When Governor Rockefeller founded the university he not only envisioned it as a place where the arts and liberal science would reside but also as a place where everyone that wished to go to college had an opportunity to do it “without limitations” (Rockefeller). His purpose was to make sure that “no young man or woman in this state who had the desire and the capacity to get a higher education should be prevented from doing so because either they lack the financial means personally or that there are not the facilities in the state” (Rockefeller).

Purchase College prides itself on the variety of art and culture it offers its students and those who visit. Purchases set out to offer students an on-campus museum, designed by Philip Johnson, this was the first building to open in 1974 and housed the collection of Roy R. and Marie S. Neuberger, which led to its name. The Neuberger Museum has been and still is an essential part of the Purchase College art experience, yet not the only one. Purchase College also offers students an on-campus Performing Arts Center. With its four-theatres the Performing Arts Center offers purchase students and visitors a broad range of performances that capture, challenge, and educate as well as entertain, offering music, dance, theatre, comedy, film and family programming (artscenter).

Over the years Purchase College has offered a collaborative and unique experience for students who are interested in all types of arts (performing, visual and applied) as well as liberal arts and sciences. The College provides over 40 different programs in which students can major and 32 in which they can minor in, programs range from BAs in Art History, Biology, Arts Management, and more: BFAs in Dance, Acting, Music, Visual Arts, Film. A number of different

degrees including BA, BS, BSVA, BFA, etc. The College also provides its students with an extensive cultural educational opportunity to go study abroad in over 60 countries. As of the academic year of 2019-20 there are 3,695 students enrolled in the college, 3,610 undergraduate and 85 graduates with a 59% female-identifying and 40.1% male identifying students (purchase).

Today Purchase has made a name for itself as being the eccentric cousin of the SUNY System and constantly uphold their motto of “Think Wide Open”. From letting students have a voice through their Student Government Association, getting to name and personalize their living spaces, applying a sustainable way to live on campus, having an extensive number of arts portrayed through the campus whether it is dance shows in the middle of the Great Lawn, weekly shows at the student-run center (the Stood), sculptures, paintings and live art all over the school and yearly music festivals in the parking lot. Purchase is committed to being inclusive and welcoming to all of its students while finding new ways to cultivate diversity within their programs and campus wide.

Culture Shock History

After starting the early 70s as April Spring Festival with events like square dancing, puppet shows, picnics, film screenings and concerts, this Purchase College tradition became known as April showers later on in the mid 70s. Once April showers was established as a Purchase College Festival, it became a bit larger with sponsorships from The Council for the Arts in Westchester, Inc. and Day Care Council of Westchester, Inc. Also including music performances from Richie Havens and The Star-Spangled Washboard with students having to pay a fee of \$1 for entry (\$4 for guest) to have access to the festival.

In 1993 The Festival obtained its current name Culture Shock. Throughout the years Culture Shock has grown, you’ll know longer see current purchase students like John Gibson, alumni of

1978 who recalls performing in what used to be April showers (Boland), however you will get to see up and coming artist performances like, Project Jenny, Paper Route, Destiny's Child, Drake, SZA, Azelia Banks, EarthGang, Denzel Curry and many more, who have all been part of previous Culture Shocks. Something that has also changed is the entry fee for the event, students no longer have to pay for entry as it is covered by the mandatory student activity fee (MSAF) charged at the beginning of each semester; you will no longer see puppet shows or auctions being held at Culture Shock but what will be present is free carnival rides and games, wellness and beer tents (for those students who are of drinking age) and various numbers of food trucks, all available during the two days of the festival during the last weekend of April. This all-student-run festival is one of the biggest things the Purchase community looks forward to, with an approximate attendance of more than 2,000 students and guests.

Culture Shock not only offers all of these amazing performances, rides, and good food. It also offers an experience for students who are interested in event programming at Purchase. As mentioned before this event is an all-student-run event so it is a learning experience for students, from booking the rides with the proper company to contacting agents and negotiating contracts, making sure there's all the necessary lighting, sound, and visual equipment for the coming artist, riders being fulfilled and also of course picking a theme and designs for merchandise, the major events coordinator with some help the Student Activities Board (SAB) from the Student Center (Stood) who are all part of the Purchase Student Government Association (PSGA) are charge of putting this event together.

As per accordance of the PSGA constitution, a *general programming coordinator* (GPC), is a student who is in charge of booking, planning, and executing weekly shows, when mentioning major events (large scale) that a GPC coordinator programs we refer to Zombie prom,

StoodOween, sk80s, pre-fest and Pre-Shock. This is a two-person job, and these two people are predominately in charge of running the social-events calendar for the whole academic year. In the other hand a *major events coordinator* (MEC), is a student responsible for planning and coordinating all major events in both the fall and spring semesters.

The Purchase student government is essentially “who is responsible” of Culture Shock funding, through students’ MSAF fee, the coordinator of finance for the organization is in charge of creating a budget that includes the spending for all activities and events, the PSGA was not always in charge of financing this however, sometimes in the 80s the entity in charge of the administration of funds was the Campus Action Council (CAC). The budget for Culture Shock falls between \$100,000.00-\$150,000.00 normally, the way in which the amount of Culture Shock budget is decided often goes with the amount of funds this organization (the PSGA) has for the fiscal year. This year due to Covid, the Purchase Student Government decided it was not deemed appropriate for the students to pay a full Mandatory Student Activity Fee of \$125 per semester, since there were no live events or activities and most students were living off campus and taking classes remotely. The MSAF was lowered to \$75 per student, to cover of course remote activities and other programing that would be done this year.

Every spring the Purchase Colleges students gather in the Central 2 parking lot of the school to experience what is now known as Culture Shock. Being one of the biggest events on campus, most of the Purchase College students look forward to it every single year. Each year it seems to get bigger and better along with its expectations, you will often see many students enjoying rides like the ferris wheel, the carousel and bumper cards, as well as the multiple food trucks the planners of the events bring on, trucks like the Halal Guys food trucks, the Three Little Piggies food truck, cupcake food truck and others more.

You will also see a lot of students express their love for Culture Shock, through the way they dress with very bright colored outfits or simply extravagant makeup, others choose to show their excitement by dancing uncontrollably to the performances that often happen from 4pm to 1am on Friday and from 12pm to 12am on Saturday. In the days of Culture Shock students can be seen with plates full of desserts like fried Oreos and funnel cake in their hands or with merchandise memorabilia from the event, that can be acquired the day of Culture Shock or the day before, along with wristbands at an event known as Pre-Shock; either way you will see the majority of students flaunting big smiles and having a good time during these two day.

Campus Student Events and COVID

In the year 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic arrived, everything changed. Before it could happen Culture Shock 2020 was canceled as it was no longer safe to be on campus. Purchase College was not the only college that faced issues during this time. “Collin College in Texas, a faculty member recently died from the virus, moved all winter term classes online, citing a surge in regional coronavirus cases... University of Colorado’s flagship campus, officials said spring classes would begin fully online and that the spring commencement ceremony would be held virtually.” (The New York Times) Schools were moved to remote learning, via zoom and others that tried to have in person learning were faced with challenges like outbreaks of the Covid-19 virus. Almost a year later with everyone still being limited to their homes and in person events being susceptible to cause more outbreaks, many colleges had to find a way to bring events and activities to students at home.

Similar to Purchase College other schools had to come up with new ideas to engage their students through the now virtual world. Cornell University is one these examples. Those who now

visit their student and campus life page see virtual events like “at home fitness videos”, “Virtual Community service” and even “Cornell University Music Festival” along with many other virtual school events (Cornell). Likewise, Ithaca College has created a website filled with virtual events ideas for their school’s organizations, with “interactive activities”, “personal growth and wellness”, and alike to purchase virtual open mic events and concerts for students (Ithaca). Another example of the pandemic bringing on a new form of events is SUNYFest. After a long two semester trying to bring engagement from students up during the pandemic, the SUNY system has brought together a number of New York state universities for its very first SUNYFest. “SUNYFest, the first-ever system-wide virtual music festival at the State University of New York, brought students together safely with their peers at SUNY schools throughout New York State for a day of musical acts and performances.”(SUNY) The event welcomes headliner Kesha and The AJR brothers as well as performances from student from multiple SUNY’s like Binghamton University, University at Albany, Clinton Community College and many others, it is the first event of its kind and likely not the last.

Equally to the SUNY system finding a way to bring performing arts to college students, seeing the rise of virtual events companies like The College Agency, an agency that specializes in providing entertainment to college campus has had to take their once live performance world virtually. In their website they now offer multiple events through their Zoom pro accounts like virtual speakers and workshops, spoken word performances, virtual comedy shows and some more interactive virtual events like college virtual lip-sync battle, virtual salsa, virtual mind reading show and more, in order to engage the now virtual world of college programming (The College Agency).

Virtual Culture Shock

This year as a result of the pandemic the Students Activities Board decided to host traditional events like Fall Fest and Culture Shock virtually. In the fall of 2021, the Purchase student government and the Student Activities Board tried to engage students both on and off campus, by hosting virtual events but with low engagement during this semester it seemed to the Purchase College community like nothing was happening. The spring semester brought more virtual events like performances by purchase students, open mic nights, poetry readings, virtual dj events and even performances where Purchase alumni joined the GPC on Zoom to perform. The higher engagement in events and activity for the spring semester led to the delivery of events like Paint and Mocktailz, an event where students participated in a painting class while drinking mocktails in the Great lawn and MSAF Fest/Pre-Shock. Usually, MSAF Fest and Pre-Shock are two events that are held separately towards the end of the year, MSAF Fest is used to advertise the MSAF vote happening that year and encourage students to keep the Mandatory Student Activities Fee mandatory so students can continue to enjoy all the clubs, programs and events that are offered because of the MSAF; Pre-Shock, which usually happens the Thursday before culture shock is used to distribute merch and wristbands for Culture Shock. This year seeing the opportunity to have an in person event, while maintaining covid safety, the PSGA decided to host the events together both in online and in person , providing student on campus students with the opportunity to enjoy free pizza, churros and ice cream outside of the student center during the combined version of MSAF Fest/Pre-Shock. Remote students were also encouraged to participate in the remote version of the MSAF Fest/Pre-Shock event, where students could play virtual games and be part of a raffle to win gift cards. Overall engaging all Purchase College and maintaining the PSGA's

commitment to bring events that both on campus and remote students could enjoy and in preparation for Culture Shock 2021.

While trying to find a way to make virtual Culture Shock successful, it was important to reach out to one of the agencies Purchase College had utilized by the name of ICM partners, ICM Partners is one of the world's leading talent agencies, dedicated to the representation of artists. For several years now the Student Activities Board and major events coordinators have worked with ICM partners and other talent agencies to book talent for major events like Fall Fest, Zombie Prom, and Culture Shock. Once the agency was notified about the event and the different format, it was important that the MEC received a list of artists that would be within the new budget for Culture Shock this year and still deliver great performances. The apparent rule for some talent agencies this year was to promote pre-recorded events, after having experienced difficulty with online live events through different websites last fall. The common challenges with some events remained with technical issues when it was time to live stream a performance. Understanding that not everyone has the necessary internet connection and apps crashed when there is an overwhelming amount of use “having a pre-recorded performance eliminated those risks during an artist performance” expressed an ICM partners agent, Jake Gautney, during an interview.

Jake has specialized in college events for the last four years and has indicated his preference with early bookings when it comes to booking an artist for an event, “It eliminates the risk of having your desired artist not be available and gives more time for last-minute additions or changes” (Gautney). A lot of colleges, like Purchase had their budgets altered due to Covid this year but unlike the PSGA their budgets were not finalized until mid-March, which was not only late to start booking but created a high demand for artists at a very close date to any events. One of the things that facilitated the booking process for Culture Shock during this time was the

PSGA's ability to have the budget finalized before the start of the semester in February, which provided the opportunity to have the artist for Culture Shock 2021 booked by March. This timeline for a regular Culture Shock period was very late however for a virtual-mid pandemic one was right on time.

In addition to having two main headliners booked through ICM partners, there was the need for openers. With the help of the Student Activities Board, an up-and-coming musical artist, Cisco Swank and a Purchase alum band were chosen. As Purchase Major Events Coordinator should often keep in mind about Culture Shock and any event at Purchase in general is the option to bringing back alumni for performances is encouraged, in many events you will sometimes see up to 5-6 Purchase alums performing once again in the purchase stage to reminisce where they started. Nonetheless, the idea to have a purchase alum band for Culture Shock soon came to an end because due to the pandemic and their current locations they weren't able to do a pre-recorded set-in time. Although it was disappointed it is understandable, as these were not the only way or only artist that have been affected by the pandemic, so the Culture Shock 2021 lineup changed from a purchase alum band to a dj set by a popular dj within the purchasing community, dj DanaLu.

These performances weren't the only way in which Culture Shock was set to display arts. The performances are a big part of a live show, but Culture Shock was also set to incorporate a chance for students that had been working on any type of art during this discouraging time for the arts, to have a chance to showcase it with a virtual Culture Shock gallery. During in person Culture Shock, students go to the stood to see the murals created by students and often walk through the forum art space which often has exhibitions during that weekend, so a plan was made to have something similar within virtual Culture Shock.

From the research done before Culture Shock took place, it seemed that the event planning companies had given advice on how to make a remote online event successful and appealing to the public, the website *Bizbash* published the article “The Ten Skills Every Event Planner Needs in a Covid-19 World” listing experiences and pieces of advice from different booking agents:

- “A virtual event should be inclusive for the widest possible audience.”
- “Once you have a content plan in place, don't overlook accessibility”.
- “If your videos aren't accessible to everyone, you're limiting your reach” (Hoffman).

This resonated during Culture Shock because accessibility was very important to the event, it was crucial that every student in person and remote got to experience virtual Culture Shock. The event wasn't being broadcasted over Zoom, like many others and the refusal to use Zoom as a streaming website had to do with the multiple technical difficulties it had presented before, For instance in previous occasions the app had issues maintaining a consistent signal while streaming an events causing for lagging image, other times it had been common for the audio on calls to be echo-ig or inaudible and because of all of these issues the application would constantly go through updates that would complicate and delay video calls therefor Zoom was not an ideal option for this type of event. It was important to make the event accessible to all students including those in different time zones, that might have not been able to access the performances if it were only available for two hours over zoom, therefore the event took place in its own website culture-shock.glitch.me and was able to be accessed anytime for a week. A new problem surfaced when it came to the website, Because of the budgeted amount that was available to pay for web design his pay only included the design and creation of the website and made pay for extra hours of work (during the live event) not possible ,yet the website also gave sole administration and editing

privilege to him and created a risk for the Student Activities Board because no one on the team was familiar with web design and wouldn't be able to solve any issues if the website crashed while it was live ; “Topics that every event planner should be exploring now are event crisis communication, emergency preparedness, contract negotiations, event design, inclusive event strategies.....” (Hoffman), as a result of statements as such the practice of “emergency preparedness” helped during the 2021 Culture Shock. The MEC was able to negotiate for the web designer to be available during the first few hours where it was expected for the website to have more foot traffic in order to help if there were any. When culture shock takes place normally there is always a set-up of all the rides, stage, lighting the day before, usually, Thursday night- Early Friday before the first performances happen, being online was no different, there was a run-through of the website and uploaded videos both the Friday before the website launched and the Saturday (April 24th) of launch, in the case any there was problems there would be a already tested and set solution for it. Thus, when a problem with the website “crashing” did come about the web designer was able to fix it within minutes because of the prepared plan there was already in place in case of any incident.

Although events are being hosted online, both of the headlining artists Rubi Rose and Yung Baby Tate, still had clauses in their contracts that prevented anyone from outside of the Purchase College community to have access to the performances .Since the performances were pre-recorded their booking managers were made aware that these performances would not just be showed once on a website but they would be kept on the website for a week for students to be able to see them, which made the streaming of the performances more complicated .Rather than the pre-recorded performances being linked from our website to YouTube where anyone could see it, the

performances had to be password protected where only Purchase College students would be able to access it . Extensive research was done by the MEC on how to make a performance private with a set launch time but also have the link accessed through the Culture Shock 2021 website that was password protected , after weighing out all the options and consulting with the artist managers the best was Vimeo, a video hosting, sharing, and services platform, this was eventually was the website chosen to stream all the pre-record performances for Culture Shock.

With a very different platform of Culture Shock this year the event had to be advertise much more than any other. As mentioned before the traditional event that happens the day before Culture Shock, Pre-Shock, was held both in person and virtually a week prior in order to encourage students to log into virtual culture shock the following week. This was just one of the ways in which the PSGA and the SAB engaged students, there was also a raffle for gift cards and culture shock 2021 t-shirts for remote students in addition to a merch give away to on campus students in the stood during a live stream of all the performances ,beginning from the time the website went live. Additionally there was a lot of promotion on the PSGA platform , Pantherlink , as well as on the Stood's Instagram and Facebook accounts , these two social platforms for the stood have over four-thousand followers combined and are often used to promote events that happen or are related to the stood, other parts of the advertisement for the event included the poster designed by the PSGA's lead designer and a preview of the website that the website designer had provided.

The day of the event the website went live at 8 pm eastern standard time and had approximately 20 people log in at exactly that time. During the first hours there were some challenges, for virtual culture shock there was a merch and gift card give away set up for students to access. Students would log in with their purchase credentials, put down the information where

they would like the giveaway to be shipped to, in order for the SAB to mail them their prizes. Technical difficulties with this took place when students could not input their credentials and utilize the website to obtain prizes, this was mostly due to the surprising fact that students were not familiar with the PSGA's Pantherlink website, although Pantherlink is a platform where students can "[obtain] information on joining student clubs, contacting officers of the clubs and student run services, view student club meeting times, see news articles posted by our clubs and student run services, see PSGA events..." (PSGA) Purchase College students were not as comfortable using this website as expected by the SAB. Subsequently this brought up the question of how engaged the students actually were with services provided by the PSGA, if students weren't familiar with the main platform used to obtain information about PSGA events and activities during this "all virtual" period, that would explain why students weren't as engaged with other activities and events happening. As the website was live for a longer time more students seemed to join, it is important to also take notice that the day of culture shock there was a live stream of the website at the Stood, during the live stream of the event, the giveaway that was happening both online and at the stood was also being advertised through the Stood's social media. While the live stream at the stood took place some students showed up specifically to receive their merch and others to enjoy the performances and the games that's available at the stood regularly. At the end of the night there were approximately 30-35 students that attended the stood during the event of Culture Shock and over fifty-students that attended the website event that night, according to website analytics.

These results were not what the PSGA, SAB and MEC had expected for this event, a non-virtual, pre pandemic culture shock would often gather over 2,000 students and guest. Keeping in mind that according to admissions statistics student enrollment at Colleges this year were low due to the pandemic, the number of students that visit the website the day it launch was expected to be

double what it actually was. When the event and performers were announced, many students were expressing their excitement on social media for the event to happen, yet the day of the event the outcome was different, this could have been explained by students streaming the performances in groups, like it was done at the stand; students not being available to stream the performances at that date and time and eventually accessing it later or simply, students not being interested enough in the event online as they tend to be on the in-person event. Overall, the goal for Culture Shock 2021 was to have students tune into the performances, participate in the raffle and try to preserve some of the emotions that would have been present during the regular Culture Shock, the final judgement whether the event was successful or not is an opinion of each person. Some students might've found that the event was not the same as previous years, lacking the long set list of performers, rides and food trucks, others might've enjoyed the online aspect of not having to leave their home to watch a performance; and of course as the event programmers the SAB might've been disappointed on the low outcome in the amount of students that interacted with the website during the event launch and the issues during the event, however the goal was to have a virtual Culture Shock that was accessible and engaged multiple students and that essentially is what happened.

Reflection

According to Forbes Magazine "virtual events will increase valuable, diverse perspectives which will accelerate the advancement of individual organizations as well as entire industries." (Faridani) This thought is shared throughout the world right now, even as people get vaccinated, some still fear the pandemic is yet to be over and life can't go back to normal. As stated by several event programming and artist managing services currently, virtual events are here to stay even post-

pandemic and some companies have found great security in the virtual world during the pandemic. Through the research I've done, it is obvious that some places have become accustomed to the new era of virtual events, but other places that haven't found so much comfort in this have been college campuses.

College programming while students are remote is manageable to a certain extent, however still faced with minimal to low engagement in activities, colleges campuses will not be the same without their on-campus social events. Purchase College being one of the main examples, is often filled with a live weekly scheduled activities and events calendar is facing very low engagement rates for even for its most popular event of the year. All SUNYs had to come together to encourage student participation in social events this year and college events have had to create new programs in order to still be able to reach their target audience, but still students currently yearn for their time to interact with one another in person on campus. Throughout my research and execution of a virtual major event, it was made evident that although virtual programming has come a long way and has definitely made a somewhat permanent place for itself in the arts and programming world as far as college campuses are concerned, it is a momentary thing.

The planning and execution of a virtual Culture Shock was an incredibly challenging yet very rewarding experience. Experiencing this I have learned about how much people truly seek out the arts but also how much energy and effort it takes to motivate people to participate in it within a virtual world. I often like to think about the first Culture Shock I ever attended, I'd only been an intern for a few months and remember running around catering to artists, organizing merch, and looking at that year's MEC trying to figure out what was next. During Culture Shock 2018, my first Culture Shock ever, I never imagined that I could one day be in his shoes planning

and accomplishing this event that means so much to everyone. When I first started my internship with the PSGA I thought the job of an MEC and GPC, was just to plan shows and hoped others liked them. I was right to think that what a mec and GPC do is plan shows and make sure they go as planned however, as I got more extensive training and held my position longer, I came to the realization that these jobs are more than that, there is so much hard work, dedication, commitment, and confidence that goes into doing the job well. During one of my internship years, one of the GPCs told me before he left the job that there were two things I should always remember while being GPC or MEC: 1) You have put in all of your hard work into this so be proud of what you've done and your work will 100% reflect this; and 2) You will never be able to please everyone, Every student is different and they all have different expectations for these events, some can request a rock night but the others might want a poetry night, the majority will win and some will not like it, they will always want more or not agree with the work you have done but if you are confident in your work and know that everything you did was right and fair, you'll see a lot of good feedback, this I also learned through being gpc/mec is and is what I would say to the next person in my position.

In retrospective there were aspects of this year's event that I wish I could go back and change, like the issues with students not being involved enough to submit to the Culture Shock gallery; some technical issues with the raffle website where I intended to distribute merch and of course the amount of students that participated in the event overall. Nonetheless I believed this was a great learning experience when it came to the event programming world where I got to learn first-hand what works and what doesn't for a virtual event

That being said this did feel like the hardest experience I've had at Purchase, programming-wise. The first time I had the opportunity to plan Culture Shock it was very intimidating but

because of all of the in person training I had obtained that year; I was very confident in my ability not to mention it was an opportunity that I was selected to do alongside someone else but that was something that never got to happen. This year around the pressure for this event seemed even higher because in my mind it would have to redeem for the one that never took place while being the first Virtual Culture shock to ever taken place at Purchase College .In addition to all of that it was still very scary to do this all on my own but the more I thought of the event and all of its details I eventually became confident in what I had to do and my abilities to bring this event into fruition , that in part was due to the training I'd gotten for the last four years referring not only to my internship within the psga but the great training I received while enrolled in the Arts Management program at Purchase College.

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