

THE RECRUITING EFFORTS OF AN ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM EXTENSION LOCATION

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Abstract ? This paper presents a variety of methods used to recruit students and the strengths and weaknesses of the different methods. It is intended that the presentation of this paper will result in a discussion in which attendees offer their recruiting methods and experiences and the relative successes and challenges involved to the benefit of all in attendance. Methods presented in the paper include recruiting visits made to local high schools including classroom presentation visits, visits with school guidance counselors, manning an information booth in the school cafeteria or other high traffic area, and one on one and group scheduled visits with students. Also discussed are media advertisements, technology and job fairs, county fair and career day visits and recruiting at local shopping locations. Challenges posed by geographical and local job market considerations are discussed and assessment of recruiting efforts is reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the methods one extension location uses to recruit students for a engineering technology program. The recruiting efforts are a work in progress and assessment of the techniques used is in the infancy stage. We are just recently beginning to acquire quantitative data to help us decide which methods are most beneficial and we do not claim to know which approach one should follow. We offer this information so that others may be exposed to our efforts and possibly find something that they might want to employ in their recruitment program.

THE GOAL

The ultimate goal in our recruiting effort is to increase enrollment in our program. Recruiting visits or advertisements rarely result in a student immediately enrolling in our program. These contacts are usually the first step in the pursuit of this goal. A more reasonable immediate goal is to pique the student's interest in one or more of our programs by imparting upon him/her the "vision" of a fulfilling career in the field and how the field contributes to the economy and/or society. Another immediate goal is, if possible, an exchange of contact

information. It is highly desirable to obtain the prospect's mailing information so that subsequent contact can be made. We have a four inch by six inch contact card we have prospects fill out so we can make a follow up phone call and add them to our newsletter mailing list. It is also helpful to immediately distribute information to the prospect about the programs and how he/she may contact us. Another possible immediate goal is to convince the prospect to visit the campus. This allows a chance for the prospect to see the facilities and get a feel for the campus and gather detailed information. If they are a student it is desirable to have the parents present to help keep the student focused and so that all parties involved are as informed as possible about the options available. We have found campus visits with the student and parents participating to have a high success rate in future enrollment. We must, however, be careful that the parents don't dominate the conversation to the detriment of the student. By addressing all answers to the student, regardless of who is asking the question we can keep the student feeling involved.

THE CHALLENGES

We are an extension of the Purdue University School of Technology. The main campus is in West Lafayette, located about 200 miles away from our site. Purdue University typically has high and favorable name recognition. The School of Technology has eleven statewide delivery locations; these locations do not approach the same level of recognition that the main campus does. The main campus regularly experiences capacity enrollment, but our location has yet to reach its full enrollment potential (our enrollment ranks within the middle of the eleven statewide locations) and we have had declining enrollment for the past few years as is shown in Figure 1. A further challenge, possibly due to capacity enrollment at the main campus, is the lack of any separate funds allocated to recruitment.

Part of the reason for lackluster enrollment may be the area's culture. Our area has traditionally been agriculture based although it has been migrating to more of a manufacturing based economy, not due so much as to the decline of farming, but rather an increase in manufacturing.

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Indiana is ranked as the number one state in terms of the highest percentage of the population employed in manufacturing [1].

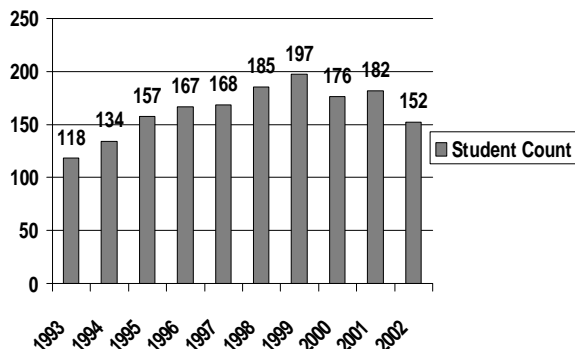


FIGURE. 1

FALL STUDENT COUNT IN PURDUE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF TECHNOLOGY AT THE RICHMOND LOCATION.

It would be reasonable to assume, given the emphasis on manufacturing, that technology degrees would be highly sought by area residents. However, many students do not feel the need to attend college since many of their parents and grandparents never attended. Indiana is ranked 47th among the states with respect to the percentage of the population with a Bachelor's degree or higher [1]. Although a fair portion of Indiana adults obtain degrees many of them leave the state, creating what has been termed a "brain drain." For those high school students who plan to go to college, there are other programs that are held in higher esteem in our geographical area – such as veterinary medicine. We postulate that this is in part due to the close ties between vets and the farming communities. Although there is a high proportion of manufacturing jobs in Indiana, they may not often require the degrees offered. It seems only fair to disclose to prospective students that they may have to leave the area to get a job in the field of their degree.

Our location offers the first two years of a 2 + 2 Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET) and Computer Integrated Manufacturing Technology (CIMT) degree. We also offer an AS in Industrial Engineering Technology (IET) and a BS in Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS), into which the technology credits from the AS degrees may apply. We have recently received approval from the state legislature to offer a BS in Industrial Technology (IT). When recruiting for the associates degree programs, it is prudent to inform the prospective students that the AS is valuable but the BS is much more marketable and the expected salary is much higher. It should also be pointed out that credits from engineering technology courses will not likely transfer towards engineering degrees.

There are a number of reasons local students may not choose to enroll in our program even if we offer a degree in

which they are interested. They are informed that if they want to pursue the BS in one of the engineering technologies, they are then faced with having to commute or relocate to another Purdue campus that grants the corresponding BS engineering technology degree. Students may instead choose to go directly to a BS granting institution initially, bypassing our location. Students sometimes may not feel that we are as legitimate as the main campus even though we have the same courses and offer similar lab facilities. Some students also find the idea of moving away from their family appealing, and the social life of the main campus alluring. They may experience a group mentality that moving away to go to college, rather than commuting locally, is more socially acceptable.

For these reasons, recruiting visits present exceptional communication challenges. Dealing with, and changing, cultural biases, preconceptions, and peer pressure is often not practical or possible due to time constraints and the flow of the conversation. Additionally, conveying a non-traditional, complex program under these conditions is difficult.

RECRUITING TECHNIQUES

Techniques used by our location primarily consist of manning an information booth, making presentations to local high school students, mailing newsletters, advertising in the local high school papers, and advertising in the local newspaper.

Advertisements in the local newspaper are usually in the form of a small ad that includes the university logo, degrees offered and some specific class names and start dates. Advertisements in the high school papers typically include the university logo and the names of the degrees we offer. Paper ads have the advantage of being distributed to a large audience. Disadvantages include advertising expense, a limited amount of information being communicated, and not being able to easily determine how often they are noticed by readers likely to enroll in classes and the advertisement's effectiveness when noticed.

Mailed newsletters have the advantage of being targeted at interested parties such as current and former students, and people that have filled out contact information cards. A much greater amount of information is also available to the recipient. The disadvantages include the resources it takes to create and mail the newsletters and the difficulty in determining how effective newsletters are in maintaining or increasing enrollment.

Visits to the local high schools consume most of our recruiting efforts. The initial visit to a high school is made to one or more counselors. The counselors are instrumental in guiding students through the options of higher education so we attempt to familiarize the counselor with our program and leave information with them that they can use to inform students as the occasions arise. The counselors are also the contact we use to set up visits with the students. Counselors

often will offer input that can be used to help develop a plan for follow up visits to students at their school. They can suggest dates and times for visits that do not compete with other activities scheduled at the school or they may suggest a day when other recruiters are visiting in which you can also participate.

Our visits to students in the high school take the form of classroom presentations, meeting with students that sign up for a visit on a predetermined date, or manning an information table in a high traffic area.

Classroom presentations provide us with a captive audience that we can explain our program to but may be difficult to schedule since teachers are often reluctant to dedicate class time to recruiting visits. The teacher may provide the class time if the presentation is relevant to the subject matter of the class. The presentation should be somewhat entertaining to keep the attention of the students and provide a positive experience to increase the likelihood of enrollment.

Meeting with students that sign up for a time slot on a day we plan to visit is very desirable since we meet one on one or with a small group of students that have indicated an interest in our program. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get students to sign up for a visit. However, the attempt should be made since any interest shown has a high likelihood of resulting in future enrollment. Having students sign up for visits on a scheduled day can be done by having an announcement made during the general announcements in home room and posting flyers on bulletin boards at the schools that inform students how they can sign up for a visit and why it is to their advantage to do so. The counselor can help get our announcement made and can help see that the posters or fliers get posted. We check to make sure someone has signed up before making the trip to the school on the scheduled day.

Information table events are usually easy to arrange and can be done by contacting the counselor. Manning an information table is often the only practical way we can get through the front doors of some high schools. They are relatively easy to schedule since they do not take away from class time and require little coordination other than a table and a location in a high traffic area.

Recruiting at technology fairs, job fairs, and county fairs usually consist of manning an information table.

THE INFORMATION TABLE

The set up used by the authors typically consists of a folding table covered with a table cloth with the Purdue University emblem that drapes over the edge, giving an elegant appearance to the display. A multi paneled fabric display board covered with pictures of students and faculty in the classrooms and labs is placed on the table. Attached to the top of the panels is a placard with the university name and emblem and program name. On the table are placed brochures that describe the different programs of study,

business cards, student mailing address cards and a laptop computer with flashy, ever-changing relevant graphics. A picture of our display is shown in Figure 2.

The display rarely stays in one location for more than a few hours (other than storage) so portability is critical. If it is difficult to erect and transport the display the recruiter will be disinclined to schedule appearances. The host school or facility usually provides the table and arrangements to do so should be verified beforehand. The background panels are lightweight and fold and fit into a zippered soft-sided case with a carrying handle. The placard easily mounts to the panels. The panels and placard were purchased as a package from Radius, Inc. Brochures, tablecloth, laptop, and sundry items are easily transported.

We have used the information tables at high schools, shopping malls, county fairs and various other locations.

HIGH SCHOOL VISITS

High school visits are the most frequent for us and usually take the form of a career fair or as an individual visit by the recruiter.

Career fair events are scheduled by the high school (or by the community at a neutral location) and a number of colleges and professions are invited to attend and recruit students. Advantages to this situation include that our attendance is welcome, the students have time to talk to us, and are assumed to be there with the intent of getting information about college and careers. A disadvantage of this arrangement is that we are competing with other schools and institutions (including, in our case, our main campus) for the attention of the students. Another disadvantage is we often see a clique mentality where a group of students will travel together following a leader. If the leader is not interested in our program the whole group may bypass our table. We make contact early in the school year with the various high schools and inquire about such events and plan accordingly.

Individual visits to the high schools in which we set up our information table is usually easily be arranged. These visits usually occur during the lunch period since this is the time that students have available outside of classes. It is desirable to set up the table in a prominent, high traffic area. During lunch period this would usually occur near the cafeteria. These visits do not always yield meaningful contacts but often it is the only way some of the high schools will allow us to visit. Contacts made with students during lunch visits are usually brief since it typically occurs just before or after the student's lunch and time is limited. Lunchtime is a social time for the students and it takes a certain amount of courage for the student to approach our table if it is located in the lunchroom or other place where students congregate. They realize that there may be a number of students watching as they approach our table and may therefore hesitate to do so.

On the positive side, lunch visits give our program visibility and keep us in touch with the high school students and the school atmosphere. Since time is limited, a goal



FIGURE. 2

INFORMATION TABLE USED FOR RECRUITING BY RICHMOND LOCATION.

of the lunch visit is to get them interested in our program and get mailing information for the student so we can send additional information and make follow up contact by phone or e-mail. The address of our website is prominently displayed so student can get further information without having to talk to us. Choosing high schools to visit is usually based on geographic location and student population. Lunch visits are coordinated through the school counselors. We request that a table for our display be made available and ask for advice on an advantageous location. We let the counselor know if we need an electric outlet or other utilities in the vicinity. We also inquire as to any visitor sign-in procedures and where we might park to minimize the distance we have to carry our materials. It is good practice to call the day before to remind the counselor of our visit. We can request that our visit be communicated over the morning homeroom announcements; however, we are aware that it is common for the students to use homeroom time as social time and to not pay attention to the announcements. We supply posters to the counselor for display throughout the building to inform the student of our impending visit but the posters may not get displayed or noticed.

OUTSIDE THE HIGH SCHOOLS

Students don't typically go to the shopping mall or county fair with the intent of obtaining college program information. Thus we are likely to be mostly ignored at these events, but they can be beneficial in that it gives our program visibility and the next time they see us recruiting they may be more apt to be interested. These venues can also result in conversations that may lead to contacts that are fruitful. Someone might approach us who knows of

someone else who may be interested in our program. Also, we are located in Indiana and people are sometimes reluctant to talk to people they are not familiar with. The state nickname is the "Hoosiers" which reportedly derives from "who's your", as in who's your family, and how are you connected to the community. The cultural norm here prescribes to a lot of "face time" when doing business, e.g., face-to face contact and handshakes. Therefore the more we can increase our program's presence in the community the better our chance of acceptance and recruiting success.

CAPTURING THE PROSPECT'S ATTENTION

Once we have arranged for an appearance and set up our display in an appropriate location we now have the challenge of attracting students and promoting our program. We must present a professional image to be taken seriously. Our appearance gives our program a degree of legitimacy. We want to portray an image that the student desires to emulate in their choice of careers. Our body language has to show that we are open to being approached and that we don't seem intimidating. We should not seem preoccupied unless it is for the purpose to catch the attention of the prospect. A laptop computer that displays changing images that are eye-catching and that have relevance to our discipline can be a useful tool to draw the prospects attention to our table. The brochures are placed in an orderly fashion and in a location on the table easily accessed by the student. The pictures on the display board are intriguing to the student and give them the feeling that they desire themselves to be in the types of situations shown. The photos are fairly up-to-date (or timeless) regarding any fashions and technologies pictured. Business cards are prominently displayed. We have found business cards to be highly desirable among students. We have even seen students sneak up and take a few business cards hoping to not be noticed. When asked, students have expressed the view that it is "cool" to have someone's business card in their wallet. For this reason we are considering formulating a way to get our program information on a business card for recruiting purposes.

ANATOMY OF A TABLE CONTACT

Few students will be direct and approach the table asking for information about the programs. We must therefore be able to identify candidates by reading their actions and body language. The prospects may linger in the area and that's the indication that they may be interested. We typically will approach the prospect with a greeting and asking them what kind of career or program they are interested in, or, what is it that they want to do after high school, or, make small talk or make a joke. We must be direct fairly quickly because we may not have their attention very long. We can often tell when we are losing their attention by watching their eyes. If their eyes start to wander or they start fidgeting, we need to recapture their attention as quickly as possible. Often they will say that they have their mind made up about the type of

American Society for Engineering Education

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April 4-5, 2003 – Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN

program in which they are interested. If it is not a program we offer, we can often tell them of some classes they can take at our location that will transfer to another institution and make them aware of a location that offers their program of interest. Although it may not appear as though they are interested in what we offer, you might tell them what you offer and maybe they might know someone that *is* interested. If they are interested in our program, we discuss some of the aforementioned topics and try to give them “the vision”. At a bare minimum, we try to get interested prospects to fill out a mailing address contact card so we can make a follow up phone call or e-mail and send them additional information on our programs.

ASSESSMENT

We have currently begun a database that includes the information of everyone that has filled out a contact card. We plan to compare this database to enrollment information every semester to see how many of the people that filled out a contact card consequently enrolled in one or more of our classes. The first assessment was done on this spring semester’s enrollment and none of the people that have filled out contact cards have enrolled in spring classes. This is not as disheartening as it may seem since we would expect that the bulk of our new students would begin taking classes in the summer or fall semesters.

CONCLUSION

We continue to experience a decline in enrollment. We are currently reviewing our recruiting efforts and are interested in the efforts of others so that we may improve our chances of success. It is desired that this paper will result in an exchange of ideas that will benefit all that are interested in recruiting methods.

[1] United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov