

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Partnering with Faculty to Recruit Undergraduate Students: Successful Tactics for Collaboration

By Lee Furbeck

With an increasing number of institutions chasing a shrinking pool of prospective applicants, most schools are actively on the lookout for new recruitment strategies for reaching and converting potential students. A key component of the prospective student experience and an important factor in students' decision-making process, faculty are better poised than any other university representatives to convey institutional rigor, the classroom experience, and potential outcomes for graduates. When faculty members are committed to institutional mission and values, they are strong, authoritative ambassadors uniquely communicating the student-faculty experience. Because they can confirm student expectations for attending and graduating from the institution, professors personify academic programs. For those seeking to launch or broaden such efforts, this article covers the basics of faculty involvement in undergraduate recruitment, from defining recruitment goals and strategies for faculty participation to organizing, administering, and tracking faculty recruitment initiatives. Once a preliminary coalition of faculty volunteers has been identified, admissions staff should align their faculty resources with on-campus, off-campus, and digital recruitment opportunities. Providing a menu of opportunities for involvement will result in increased participation, collaboration, and success.

Whether a college or university is seeking enrollment growth, shaping the class, or both, competition for undergraduate students has increased. Numerous factors including a drop in the national birthrate and the rising cost of college have contributed to recent enrollment decreases, and changes to the National Association for College Admissions Counseling's "Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admissions" have extended the recruitment cycle. Average yield rates (percentage of admit to enrolled) fell nationally for four-year publics from 37.5 percent in 2017 to 32 percent in 2018, a single year drop of 5.5 percent (Ruffalo Noel Levitz 2019). As such, institutions must utilize all the tools at their disposal including what is arguably the most valuable resource—faculty. A key component of the prospective student experience and an important factor in their decision-making process, faculty are better poised than any other university representatives to convey institutional rigor, the classroom experience, and potential outcomes for graduates, and studies consistently show that positive prospective student interactions with faculty play an important role in the college search. While students may not understand the role of a provost or a dean, prospective students get that professors will play an important role in their experience as a college student and beyond. Because they can confirm student expectations for attending and graduating from the college or university under consideration, professors personify academic programs and serve as "trust agents" (SEM Works 2020). Institutions must go beyond merely declaring that the college has "high quality" programs with "cutting edge" faculty by supplying proof (SEM Works 2020). The intentional integration of undergraduate faculty efforts into the recruitment process can positively influence application rates and yield for students who are able to form relationships with faculty before matriculating (Mee 2019).

Building on the strength of this knowledge, small, private institutions have a history of providing prospective students with opportunities to meet with faculty members. At one small college in the Midwest, approximately 85 percent of prospective students visiting campus meet with a faculty member, and the personal

connection that results is a driving factor in students choosing to enroll. In the experience of one faculty member, "Professors hold a key role in recruiting students, especially at private colleges and small public schools" (Erickson 2015). But the same can be said for other institutional types, from community colleges to state schools with tens of thousands of students, even if the method of contact differs. A study focused on a set of majors at California State University found that "more than 70 percent of students choosing [CSU] reported a conversation with a professor in a [their] specific area of study during the admissions process" (Rocca 2013). In general, faculty and academic staff play a significant role in college choice—sometimes more so than parents (Johnston 2010). When faculty members are committed to institutional mission and values, they are strong, authoritative ambassadors communicating the student-faculty experience in a way that only they can.

For those seeking to launch or broaden such efforts, this article covers the basics of faculty involvement in undergraduate recruitment from defining recruitment goals and strategies for faculty participation to organizing, administering, and tracking faculty recruitment initiatives. Also presented are strategies for mobilizing faculty, articulating benefits, and overcoming objections. Finally, a variety of specific tactics for faculty involvement—ranging from aligning faculty with student engagement opportunities to faculty involvement in social media and digital marketing recruitment initiatives—will be presented with the goal of equipping readers with the basic tools to build or improve upon their own faculty recruitment initiatives. Case studies are: drawn from the experience of the author (as both a professional and parent); gleaned from colleagues; and discovered through a search of current practice at institutions that have implemented innovative, successful faculty recruitment initiatives.

Background

The idea of engaging faculty in undergraduate student recruitment and enrollment initiatives is not new, and many institutions have always relied on building individual attention during the recruitment process into

their brand. There is no shortage of writings about faculty involvement in undergraduate recruitment, and to attempt to list them all here would not be practical. As such, selected examples are provided to illustrate various treatments of the subject.

Early work in this area explored not only faculty participation in undergraduate recruitment but also holding faculty accountable for student enrollment (Todd and Crofton 2001). An advocate of engaging marketing faculty in recruitment initiatives, Bristow (1998) serves as another early example of a writer exploring the possibilities and mechanisms of involving academics in recruitment. More recently, Barnds (2013) provided a straightforward approach to mobilizing faculty and leveraging their expertise for student recruitment; Hope (2014) explored faculty involvement more broadly in both recruitment and retention; and others such as Protivnak and Yensel (2017) narrowed the topic to a single discipline and career path, calling for engaging faculty based on their passion for the subject.

Most of the recent recommendations for why and how to involve faculty in recruitment appear in studies done by organizations involved with enrollment management research and those in the higher education marketplace, such as SEM Works and EAB (2020), and in blogs and articles. For example, a SEM Works whitepaper offers “7 Effective Faculty-Delivered Student Recruitment Strategies” while a recent EAB webinar focused on enrollment and academic leaders working together to create and implement a scalable strategy. Finally, in recent blog posts an offering from Higher Education Marketing (2016) covers in-person and digital faculty recruitment strategies for domestic and international undergraduates, and Lauren Elrick lays out strategies for “using faculty as recruitment tools” (2017).

Previous AACRAO publications have also explored faculty recruitment initiatives from various perspectives including SEM planning, international efforts, and engagement with on-campus visits and events. In an early example, Huneycutt, Lewis, and Wibker (1990) focused specifically on calling on the expertise of faculty teaching in marketing to influence student recruitment and enrollment behaviors. Carter, Lehman, and Trem-

blay’s “Engaging Faculty in Undergraduate Recruitment: Perspectives, Suggestions and Tips” (2008), Pollock’s “Undergraduate Student Recruitment: The Role of Faculty” (2003), Freed and Howell’s “Creating a High-Touch Recruitment Event: Utilizing Faculty to Recruit and Yield Students” (2018), and more recently, Smith’s “4 Ways to Engage Faculty in International SEM” (2019) serve as additional examples of various treatments of the topic.

Defining, Organizing, Administering, and Tracking Recruitment Goals and Strategies for Faculty Participation

Offers of and requests for faculty assistance with undergraduate recruitment often occur without much planning. A senior academic affairs officer may decide that the admissions office should engage faculty in a calling campaign to boost enrollment. A president may decide to devote some time to hand-signing postcards for new admits. Admissions staff may extend last-minute invitations to attend a campus event or to meet with a family visiting campus. While these strategies are not inherently bad, without a target audience, a clear purpose, and a goal in mind, they are unlikely to be successful. And even if they are, without tracking and measurable goals, no one would know. Proactive, long-term planning in which faculty involvement is a part of a broader recruitment strategy is necessary for the success of faculty recruitment endeavors.

Given the influence of faculty interactions on a prospective student’s choice, a strategic approach is necessary to integrate such faculty initiatives with other recruitment efforts and to ensure a positive outcome for all participants. Integrating a faculty component into the admissions recruitment plan starts with a common understanding of desired outcomes. As such, all parties should be made aware and kept informed regarding enrollment targets and how faculty interaction fits into the overall recruitment plan. Transparent communication of recruitment and enrollment goals, ongoing assessment of implementation measures and results, and positive and negative feedback establish an atmosphere

of mutual trust and respect as well as a shared sense of purpose. Sharing enrollment data and tuition revenue for each department with faculty representatives creates buy-in for shared goals and increases understanding of the objectives of the admissions office (Higher Education Marketing 2016).

One way to achieve this state is an enrollment management or student recruitment committee involving representatives from all segments. Such a group can help provide meaningful insights, achieve buy-in, and encourage shared participation in progressing toward defined goals (Higher Education Marketing 2016). An enrollment management or student recruitment committee can function at different levels (*i.e.* big picture vs. tactical), ensuring all are aligned with enrollment goals and are aware of current and future initiatives. Information sharing, education, and lessons learned can prove invaluable. A “big picture” committee might include deans or associate deans representing each academic area and senior enrollment leaders. Groups with this make-up are useful for planning and as a venue for introducing changes to admissions and recruitment policies and procedures. More tactical groups are best suited for information sharing and brainstorming. In either case, the success of these groups as a launch point for faculty involvement in recruitment relies on ensuring that academic representatives have a seat at the table.

Faculty will be more eager to recruit if they’re appropriately incentivized and appreciate seeing proof that their efforts are worthwhile. To keep faculty engaged, the admissions staff must develop metrics for success and share results with faculty volunteers regularly. Whether encouraging faculty to promote the institution to former students and colleagues or creating opportunities for deploying videos of professors working with students in a communication stream or in social media, the impact of efforts should be tracked. Analyze the success of faculty recruitment efforts with your campus information system to properly recognize and reward each member’s support, tracking individual contacts and meetings on the path to enrollment. Highlight successful interactions that other faculty members have had with prospective students and the results of

those interactions. Admissions teams should always be prepared to provide specific examples of how current faculty members are making a difference and impacting recruitment efforts. Finally, closing the loop with an annual summary illustrating the results of faculty initiatives emphasizes the value of their efforts while providing an opportunity to discuss new initiatives and improvements (Higher Education Marketing 2016).

Mobilizing Faculty, Articulating Benefits, and Overcoming Objections

For faculty to play a vital role in any institution’s vision for enrollment goals, they must understand and agree with the desired direction of the institution and feel their contributions are valued. There are many reasons why faculty may not or may be hesitant to engage in undergraduate student recruitment. For many, “recruitment” connotes activities in which faculty may not wish to be engaged. Some may be uncomfortable with specific activities such as phone calls or too busy to carve out time for impromptu visits with prospective students. Or they may not understand why their assistance is needed or useful. Some departments may have more students than they can effectively serve so their faculty have little motivation to participate in activities that would add to their workloads. And, finally, because faculty are usually hired to educate students rather than to promote their institution, they may see recruitment as someone else’s job.

Beyond satisfactorily addressing these concerns, there are many factors that may encourage or discourage their participation. To achieve the goals of getting faculty involved with student recruitment, admissions staff must ensure that faculty are made aware of the result of their efforts and understand the benefits of participating. Faculty who understand that they can contribute positively and meaningfully in the recruitment process are more likely to get involved. Providing information about how connecting with prospective students on a relational level is critical. Prospective students want to know that their professors will invest in them and their educational outcomes, and when

they are assured that this is the case and later when they experience what is promised, the benefits extend far beyond an individual student as the experiences are shared with other future students, influencers, and employers.

In a recent presentation about involving faculty members in recruitment, a question was posed: “What motivates the faculty to help?” (Erickson 2015). The motivational factor depends on the faculty member—their commitment to the institution, their field or a specific population; competing priorities inherent in the institutional reward structure; where they are in their career; and their comfort with and enjoyment in participating in recruitment activities. For instance, if an institution is experiencing an enrollment crisis overall or in a specific college or department, faculty may be more willing to devote time to recruitment activities. If service is a component in the tenure process and recruitment counts as service, this can be a motivator for newer professors who might not otherwise have time to be engaged. At the other end of the continuum, professors who already have tenure may be able to allot more time to recruitment and may feel responsible for ensuring the future of the institution or the discipline.

Depending on the institutional budget model, ranging from fully autonomous responsibility centered management (RCM) models to hybrid models that maintain some centrally funded functions, faculty, college deans, and other administrators may be conflicted about recruiting for the university in general as opposed to a specific program. Others may be simply overloaded with other responsibilities or have a surplus of students for their colleges or programs and thus perceive no need to engage in recruitment activities. The timing of recruitment events may not be desirable or possible for faculty depending on the time of day or the time of year, such as near the end or the beginning of the term, spring break, evenings and weekends, and inconvenient travel times. Some faculty may not see the benefits for their participation in terms of career advancement, release time, and additional compensation. Or, the benefits may not be attractive enough to warrant the commitment (Erickson 2015).

Assisting with recruitment and enrollment initiatives doesn’t have to involve student contact. Admissions professionals fortunate enough to have faculty interested in enrollment metrics, GPS and market identification, or predictive modeling, can invite them to the enrollment management table. Colleges and universities with business, sales, or marketing programs have a built-in resource for consulting and training. At one large, public institution, economics faculty got involved with admissions and enrollment when a graduate student produced a dissertation on enrollment metrics. The student earned his doctorate and was recruited to work in enrollment management while the research transformed the operations and focus of the admissions office. At another institution, a professor with expertise in global information systems developed a market share analysis for admissions that was used, as one example, to define funnel-stage targets for admissions territory managers. Indeed, there are probably many opportunities for faculty with related areas of expertise to complete a project for institutional enrollment leaders and parlay those efforts into a publication, presentation, or degree, thereby creating a winning situation for all.

Additional incentives for involvement can include the classroom experience and more tangible rewards. Long recognized by faculty and academic staff who work with honors students and other high academic achievers, participating in the recruitment process also provides some control over which students populate the classroom. Faculty at many schools have noted that recruiting the best students provides a more meaningful teaching experience. Other options to consider are additional compensation or changes to the faculty reward structure by weighting service more heavily. Release time for temporary assignments in enrollment management may also be attractive if the role is viewed as desirable.

Finally, if enrollment is a concern at the institution, enrollment leaders can stress the impact that faculty involvement can have on enrollment for the collective good of the organization and/or a specific department. Educating and informing faculty about issues such as decreases in state funding (for public institutions) and the growing importance of tuition revenue to institutional viability

can result in a better understanding of the impact of recruitment activities. Because their own college experience and selection process likely differed from that of the typical high school or transfer student, faculty may not realize that students view themselves as consumers and as such, they may have different “buying signals” than expected. When the success of each individual affiliated with the institution depends on the success of the institution, achieving buy-in can be much easier.

Aligning Faculty with Student Engagement Opportunities

In the absence of a mandate from academic administration (often not the most useful tactic for encouraging buy-in), how do you identify faculty members who may be willing to assist with recruitment efforts? Harnessing faculty in the thick of the college search with their own children may be a good starting point (Higher Education Marketing 2016). Just as these faculty tend to be more forthcoming about the frequency and quality of the output of the admissions office, they are also able to reflect on the importance of faculty connections as a driver to enrollment. Living through the experience of having a child recruited by a variety of institutions employing a variety of tactics, they can provide immediate feedback about the effectiveness of various strategies. By tapping into this group, admissions staff can better understand their experiences and assess their willingness to become more involved with recruitment. Other routes have equal potential. Once a committee or committees with academic representation are established, college liaisons will likely be able to point to willing participants, or even enlist them for the admissions office. Current students can also be a useful source of suggestions as they likely have their favorite professors and know who excels at interacting with current and prospective students. Finally, instead of seeking out the professors on campus with the most name recognition, consider prioritizing professors with more practical, real-world experience. Those without Nobel prizes and prestigious fellowships may have more time to contribute and may be more effective spokespeople for the institution (and more realistic examples).

Once a preliminary coalition of willing faculty volunteers has been identified, admissions staff should align their faculty resources with on-campus, off-campus, and digital recruitment opportunities. Faculty members and other academic staff are experts in their fields and not in recruitment tactics and enrollment management metrics (although, once again, recruit those who are). Providing a menu of opportunities for involvement will result in increased participation and collaboration. For every faculty member who does not wish to speak at an off-campus event, there are alternatives such as writing postcards, being filmed in the classroom and highlighted on social media, participating in a virtual event, or sharing a story about mentoring a successful student. At the most basic level, faculty members can identify selling points for their programs to be used by admissions recruiters (SEM Works 2020). Providing templates and content guidelines to professors can help focus their conversations and letters that share their unique perspectives about their field, their notable achievements, and the potential advantages of choosing their program. Letters could reference impressive student information, emphasize important aspects of the program, illustrate career possibilities and recent student success stories. Plan around faculty teaching schedules and campus events that they can attend (Higher Education Marketing 2016). Consider international faculty and those who travel frequently for opportunities where they might coordinate their schedules with recruitment fairs and meetings with prospective students in the United States or abroad. Admissions staff can alleviate pressure and discomfort by clarifying that a faculty member’s charge is to discuss their research, academic passion, and recent student outcomes, rather than operating as a salesperson for the school. Additional activities can include inviting prospective students to visit faculty during office hours, join classes with current students or, as part of a campus visit event, attend mock lectures with broad appeal led by particularly charismatic professors. To make the most of the time a faculty member can provide, small group events such as a Q&A session or informal reception are effective and efficient.

There are many examples of faculty engagement in on-campus events for prospective students. Most commonly, these events focus on a single college or related set of programs and highlight student-faculty interaction, along with specific opportunities and support programs of interest to students planning to pursue those majors. Baylor University's Preview Day offers guests a welcome from the university and from the college, a tour, an opportunity to eat lunch with faculty and current students, hands-on learning activities, a visual introduction to support services, and an opportunity for informal conversation at the end of the day. Planned and promoted by a team of faculty and admissions staff, this event resulted in a 70 percent yield rate in year one and a 87 percent yield rate in year two (Freed and Howell 2018). Central Michigan University (CMU) hosts similar college-specific events—College Days in the summer for rising seniors and Discovery Days for juniors, seniors, and transfers throughout the year. Like Baylor's Preview Days, these events focus on a single college and are co-planned by faculty members and admissions staff. The schedules differ by college and include opportunities for: personal interactions between faculty and students; a chance to view labs, equipment, and facilities related to the majors; an overview of academic support services, residential communities, internships, and career guidance; and involvement opportunities. More than half of attendees consistently enroll at CMU. (Note: Baylor's events are designed as yield events and held five to six weeks prior to the deposit deadline, while CMU's events are mostly application-generation events. Therefore, there is a difference in yield rates.)

Asking faculty to talk about what they love and excel in is a tactic that always works well. To become a faculty member, one generally must develop a passion for a specific subject or a focus on a certain question. They are the authorities in their field (and generally love to discuss it), which makes them effective recruiters for the discipline or for the institution in general. Encouraging faculty to share and communicate their strengths is always meaningful. They can accomplish this in person, with videos, via social media, during visits to their offices or laboratories, or at on- or off-campus events.

Making calls to admitted students, hosting students on campus for a few hours (with the assistance of a current student), or attending (or hosting) a recruitment event while travelling are all effective ways for faculty to engage with prospective students. For those who can't, or prefer not, to engage in in-person activities, providing or creating content to be shared via social media, print, video, and digital channels represents another way to show students what they can expect from the academic life of the institution. A regular blog post integrated with other features on the university's website can be an effective tool requiring no face-to-face contact and accomplished on the faculty member's own schedule. Almost all prospective students are active on at least one social media channel, and finding ways for faculty to engage students where they are can be highly impactful (Elrick 2017). Teaching at other colleges, connecting with and mentoring students over the years, and collaborating with other professors at different schools can be used as recruitment opportunities. Indeed, many graduate programs have used these types of connections to recruit talented students for years.

Virtual faculty outreach can be an effective mechanism for undergraduate recruitment and can be customized based on the skills and comfort level of participants. Virtual recruitment allows schools to connect with students who may be unable to travel and requires a relatively modest time commitment from faculty and administrators participating, as sessions can be recorded for reuse, and frequency and timing can vary by schedule. Delivery mechanism includes live video, embedded videos, panels, and webinars (Bredon, et al. 2018).

Finally, faculty have connections at other institutions from which they may have earned a degree or taught previously as well as connections with former colleagues, fellow students, and mentors in the discipline. Such connections can be leveraged for undergraduate recruitment. Faculty can engage in activities such as building a network of recommenders, hosting events for prospective students in areas where they have connections, capitalizing on existing travel, and guest lecturing at high schools or community colleges (Brendon, et al. 2018).

Recruiting Specific Student Populations

Faculty with an interest in serving a specific student population are invaluable partners in initiatives targeting that group. For example, a faculty member at Central Michigan University recently reached out to admissions to discuss ideas for connecting with Latinx students through community organizations in Greater Lansing, Michigan. As a result, the admissions team has partnered with faculty to sponsor workshops utilizing contacts identified by the professor and to provide and promote enhanced campus support networks. Another CMU administrator from Chicago has been a long-time supporter of efforts to recruit students from Chi-Town to Central Michigan. Recruitment season culminates each fall with a Labor Day barbecue celebration for all Chicago students at the administrator's home. Chi Culture—a recently formed student organization with sponsorship and mentors from Chicago—connects current and future students from the same geographic area and sponsors charter buses to/from Chicago during breaks.

Faculty and academic administrators who identify with those who are first-generation students or veterans are inspirational examples and usually willing allies in recruiting these populations. For example, a former president at Cleveland State University was a first-generation student, and correspondence from him to first-generation prospective students was the most lauded communication amongst hundreds, as the message and example resonated with students and parents alike. His successor, a Navy veteran, resonated strongly with prospective students with military connections. Going a step further, faculty with military backgrounds host prospective students on campus visits and participate in recruitment events and orientation sessions geared toward a military audience. At Central Michigan University, retired military personnel lead efforts at satellite campuses on military bases.

Worthy of more in-depth treatment, summer and other targeted programs are ripe for faculty involvement and can provide an opportunity to establish a connection and build affinity with prospective students. For example, Ball State University's Summer Scholars

is a week-long academic-intensive program with the mission of exposing underrepresented populations to higher education through immersion into core academic courses, interactions with faculty and staff, and engagement in the Ball State and Muncie communities. Students participating in the program live in a residence hall, attend classes, participate in community and leadership programs, and enjoy extracurricular activities (Ball State University 2020). Many other colleges and universities have similar programs, whether for high ability students, students interested in STEM fields, TRiO program participants, musicians, and a variety of other topical offerings. By working with the faculty and staff who are hosting students on campus for these opportunities, admissions staff can capitalize on the familiarity and affinity experienced by prospective students.

Transfer student engagement is the topic of a recent article published by the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students. Along with a plethora of ideas for retention initiatives, the authors detail successful recruitment initiatives at Appalachian State University (Morton and Weigl 2020). A team of faculty mentors provide curricular information and guidance to potential transfers, host students on campus, and give practical advice for finding internships or study away options—both of which can be difficult for transfer students. Team members communicate with students for the duration of their admission and college transition experiences. More casual and requiring less time commitment, departmental socials connect prospective students with like-minded faculty. Transfer students feel valued and more quickly identify with their new academic home. Hosting a transfer day attended by community college faculty and their students interested in a related set of disciplines serves as a recruitment event and strengthens connections with sending schools. Students and community college faculty can view labs and creative spaces and have meaningful conversations with university faculty (Morton and Weigl 2020).

Faculty can also be key partners for recruiting international students through technology, individual connections, or travel. Webcasts, video conferencing, and other digital communications allow faculty to follow

up with prospects and help international students begin to establish institutional connections. Professors who hail from a country other than the United States and/or speak another language can form instant connections with prospective students. Parents may appreciate having their questions and concerns addressed in their native language and will appreciate knowing that there are others at the institution who share cultural similarities or background with them and their students. Professors from diverse cultural backgrounds can also be encouraged to contribute to international digital content, sharing their experience about cultural communities on campus and addressing questions that may be specific to students from a culture or geographic region (ACE 2015).

If the faculty member is passionate about recruiting and serving a specific population of students, admissions officers are sure to find a variety of ways to ensure the involvement and ongoing development of enthusiastic, engaged faculty and staff.

Conclusion

With an increasing number of institutions chasing a shrinking pool of prospective applicants, most schools

are actively on the lookout for both new enrollment markets throughout the world and new recruitment strategies for reaching and converting potential students. Mobilizing the talents of some of institutions' most credible messengers—the faculty—can strongly influence prospective students' perception of a college or university and their decision to apply (Elrick 2017).

The more faculty are involved in recruiting and enrolling students, the better. Establishing functional channels to encourage an effective communication flow between faculty and admissions teams can be challenging but mutually empowering. The expertise of faculty members and the relationships they build matter. The influence they can have on students—both prospective and current—can truly impact recruitment. By showcasing why faculty involvement is meaningful, letting them choose how to get involved, and encouraging them to utilize their connections, they can play an important and pivotal role in increasing the effects of a university's recruitment work (Elrick 2017).

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