

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Faculty Labor in Student Recruitment: Perspectives and Practices at a Comprehensive Regional University

By Megan Brown and Zarah C. Moeggenberg

This paper examines faculty efforts in student recruitment at a comprehensive regional university. Survey data demonstrate faculty perspectives on practices and barriers regarding recruitment following COVID-19 and institutional constraints. Faculty are increasingly involved in enrollment efforts. Recommendations for supporting faculty, staff, and administrators in recruitment activities are offered.

Faculty play a significant role in recruiting and enrolling students (Hope 2020). Sometimes these interactions, such as engaging one-on-one or attending a professor's class, can be a student's deciding factor on whether they choose to attend a university or college. When prospective students have meaningful interactions with faculty, they feel more connected to the programs they will enter (Hope 2020). Institutions pressure (and require) faculty to participate in recruitment events and admissions outreach beyond the university (*e.g.*, tabling at admissions events or visiting local high schools) (Cohen 2017). Faculty involvement in recruitment has increased over time due to financial burdens from national declines in enrollment and decreases in state and federal funding (Banfield 2021; Bauman 2024; Dorn, *et al.* 2020; Mitchell, *et al.* 2019; Flannery 2022).

While expectations for common tenure and promotion criteria that faculty are evaluated upon—scholarship, teaching, service—remain in place, the time and

energy needed for enrolling, marketing, and retaining students are weighing heavily on faculty. This pressure relates the sense of precarity that was (and continues to be) created within the landscape of financial constraints—a feeling that faculty have a responsibility to contribute to strategic enrollment efforts in order to support their programs and, consequently, save their jobs. This study was designed to understand which recruitment strategies faculty find most effective and worthwhile. It aimed to understand how faculty interpret the shifting demands on their time and labor.

This article explores how faculty have had to increase their capacity to enroll and retain students. The authors present the results of a faculty survey on faculty recruitment efforts at a regional, comprehensive university. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What are faculty practices and activities that encourage enrollment? (2) What are faculty perspectives on barriers to student enrollment? This article focuses on how faculty

view their roles in recruiting and enrolling students and on the barriers they experience in their attempts to actively involve themselves in recruitment work.

In synthesizing the survey data, this article aims to make the role of faculty more visible and identify effective recruitment strategies. This work may be useful to 1) help faculty advocate for recognition and fair compensation for their work and 2) understand the strategies that are becoming more effective in this new landscape of recruitment and enrollment, especially those that require faculty to receive more support from the institution.

Profile of Metropolitan State University

Metropolitan State University was founded in 1971 as an experimental “university without walls,” designed to provide flexible, non-traditional pathways to college degrees for adult learners. Originally without a central campus, the university has expanded to three on-campus locations and currently enrolls around 10,000 students, with just over 55,000 alumni. Today, Metro State is a regional, comprehensive university that is part of the Minnesota State University system.

Metro State began as an institution that emphasized individualized learning, experiential education, and credit for prior learning. Since the 1970s, it has maintained its core commitment to serving diverse, post-traditional students. Nearly 90 percent of Metro’s students transfer prior learning, and more than half of the students are part-time.

Metro State’s faculty are deeply embedded in collective bargaining, with a union participation rate that tends to hover around 95 percent. The university provides a useful perspective for understanding the increased pressure on faculty to engage in recruitment.

Trends in Enrollment and Recruitment

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, national undergraduate enrollment decreased by 8 percent between 2019 and 2022 (Binkley 2023). These enrollment declines are particularly relevant for public re-

gional institutions like Metro State, but enrollment pressure following the COVID-19 pandemic has been widespread throughout the higher education industry (Hatch, Myskow, and Trivedi 2022; Passenti 2024). Metro State, like many others, has been impacted by the decline in federal funding for student enrollment (Woodhouse 2006). This exacerbates issues within graduate student recruitment efforts, which depend on strong undergraduate enrollment (Woodhouse 2006; Cruz 2019). Enrollment challenges and funding challenges in the Minnesota State System have led to the retrenchment of dozens of tenured faculty positions across several campuses in recent years (Harbo 2024), intensifying the perceived pressures on faculty to participate in recruitment activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing inequities in university labor across all employee groups, with disproportionate burdens falling on women, People of Color, and those in caregiving roles, highlighting how race, gender, and job category intersect to shape institutional workload. Labor fell heavily upon women (Fan and Moen 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2020). In a study on gender and faculty labor, Misra, Lundquist, and Templer (2012) found that women balance higher loads of housework and care than men, and gendered parenthood impacted faculty labor more than gender alone. The pandemic-related move to remote work widened social disparities (Fan and Moen 2021). Women who held an advanced degree and/or a management position, for example, reported increased work hours (Fan and Moen 2021). Black women are most likely to experience increased work (Fan and Moen 2021), while Hispanic women and Black men are more likely to see a reduction in their work hours (Fan and Moen 2021).¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Staff of Color experienced job precarity, and Faculty of Color engaged in more emotional labor than ever for their students.² His-

¹ Fan and Moen (2021) point to occupational segregation and disparities in remote work as possible explanations for why these disparities exist (178). However, decreased work hours may be exacerbated by mental health and increased responsibilities outside of work (e.g., child care, family care).

² Anderson Arboleda, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were key figures that drove the Black Lives Matter movement through the COVID-19 pandemic.

torically, Faculty of Color have engaged in more service and mentoring than white faculty (Antonio 2003; Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012). The burden of recruitment expectations further exacerbated faculty labor.

In addition to gender and race, faculty age is another factor that is influencing faculty perceptions of labor. For example, millennial faculty identify graduate student recruitment as part of their job responsibilities (Woodhouse 2006). Faculty from poverty and working-class backgrounds have a difficult time adapting to an economy of intellectual labor, and struggle more with activities that aren't necessarily material or tangible labor activities that are easily communicated (or affirmed) as labor (Hayes and Locke 2024; Byrne 2017).

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from faculty members across Metro State's multiple campuses. Data was collected through an online Qualtrics survey because of its efficiency in reaching a geographically diverse sample. The project employed a convenience sampling method because the study was exploratory, and the primary goal was to identify trends rather than produce generalizable results (Stratton 2021). The project leveraged existing faculty listservs and faculty union distribution channels to disseminate the survey. The final sample consisted of 65 faculty respondents out of 165 full-time faculty, for a response rate of just under 40 percent, all of whom teach at least some undergraduate classes. (While the project reached out to the 572 adjunct faculty, only two responses were received from community faculty, and they have been removed from the sample). This study received IRB approval (IRB: 2131072-1). All participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits, and measures taken to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Any identifying information was anonymized to protect the integrity of the study and participants.

The survey instrument was developed in consultation with a faculty committee³ focused on recruitment

and enrollment efforts. The survey consisted of seventeen discrete items, including both Likert-scale and open-ended questions, as well as questions to collect demographic information. Prior to survey distribution, user testing was conducted with a group of five faculty members involved in the enrollment committee to ensure clarity, relevance, and face validity. Feedback from the pilot test was incorporated into the final version of the survey.

The survey was designed to address the following key areas:

- Faculty understanding of college enrollment investment and activities.
- Faculty participation in enrollment activities.

This article discusses faculty understanding of and investment in enrollment activities. It focuses on recruitment efforts because this is a perceived source of pressure on faculty, especially at institutions experiencing enrollment declines.

Limitations

The use of convenience sampling through faculty listservs may limit the generalizability of the findings. Faculty who participate in surveys like this one are likely to be more invested in university life and enrollment activities. Nonresponse bias remains an issue, although the survey did achieve a nearly 40 percent response rate when comparing responses received to the total number of full-time tenured, or tenure-track faculty. Given the difficulty in reaching adjunct faculty, the analysis focused on full-time faculty responses. Women faculty were overrepresented in the sample, comprising 83 percent of the respondents, but the sample roughly reflected the racial demographics of the faculty, with white faculty making up 81 percent of the sample. Despite these limitations, this survey provides a foundation for further research into how faculty engage in recruitment and enrollment work in university life.

Results

Analyzing the results identified four common themes related to faculty recruitment efforts: 1) the value of

³ The committee is housed within the IFO's collective bargaining unit.

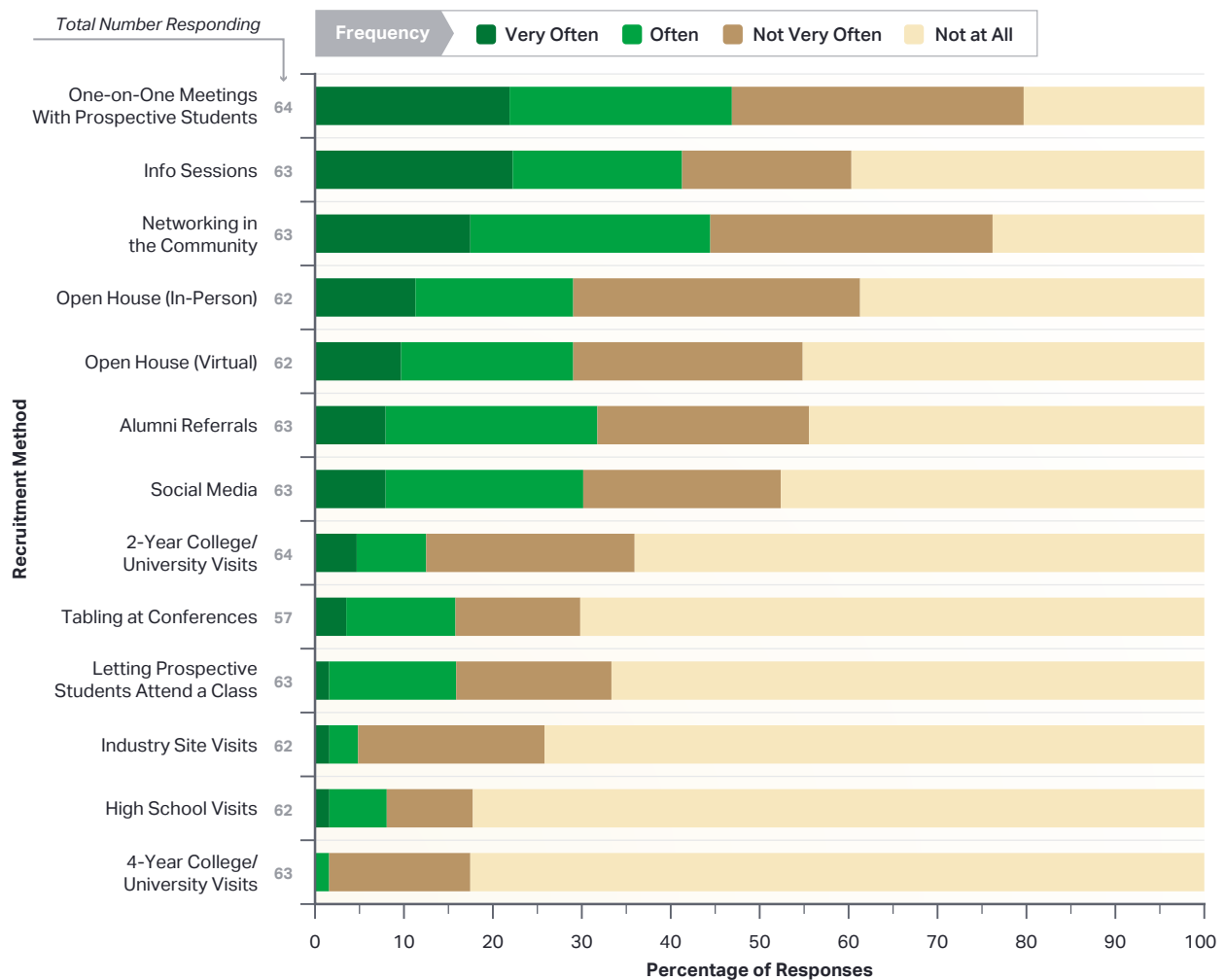


FIGURE 1 ➤ Frequency of Use of Student Recruitment Methods/Techniques by Faculty for New Students

intimate, interpersonal interactions; 2) faculty reliance upon alumni and community relationships; 3) lack of material support for recruitment; 4) lack of compensation for recruitment.

Theme 1: The Value of Intimate Personal Relationships

Survey respondents were most likely to rank one-on-one meetings, including advisor meetings, as valuable interactions with prospective students and current students (see Figure 1). These personalized engagements allowed faculty to provide tailored support to students, addressing students' specific needs and concerns. Al-

though these meetings were recognized as important, faculty were frustrated by the expectation that they engage in them without full acknowledgement of the time and effort required to do them well. Faculty ranked open houses, info sessions, and one-on-one meetings with prospective students as the actions their colleges most use to recruit new students.

One respondent commented that these engagements were effective because "people like personalized attention and connection." A personalized approach allowed faculty to address specific questions and concerns, providing a more tailored experience for prospective students. Word-of-mouth outside of direct faculty

involvement was also acknowledged as playing a significant role in recruitment: Many faculty members reported that students had told them that they decided to attend Metro State due to positive reports from current students or alumni.

Faculty reported that one-on-one connections are not only important to prospective students but also fulfilling for faculty, even though several faculty members emphasized that these types of engagements are by far the most time-consuming. As one faculty respondent noted, “I love connecting with prospective applicants.... Crowding [individual appointments] in among my many other duties has always proved challenging.” While faculty identified these interpersonal engagements as productive and important, they were also realistic and frustrated by the amount of time these engagements took without offering additional compensation or credit within university reporting structures. The tension between time and effectiveness was evident across faculty responses.

Theme 2: Reliance upon Alumni and Community Relationships

When asked about their efforts to recruit students, faculty responses focused on their own communities of practice; their relationships with alumni networks and community connections were key to their recruitment efforts. When asked about effective recruitment methods, respondents emphasized the importance of regularly corresponding with their alumni.

Alumni can be helpful in promoting new and existing programs. One respondent stated that collecting “alumni testimonials” is useful for recruitment purposes, because, as another respondent pointed out, “[t]hey speak to the classroom experience” in ways faculty cannot quite capture. Ultimately, as one respondent stated, “Developing alumni relationships has value that extends beyond the given year.” Alumni represent a network of relationships and actions that can be leveraged for various purposes; however, respondents indicated that the process to obtain and utilize alumni lists is slow and inefficient, which leads to loss of excitement and engagement.

Faculty discussed how their deep ties to communities can be leveraged by the institution. One respondent commented, “Whenever I am in a meeting with leaders in my community, I discuss how great [Name of Institution] is and invite others to spread the word.” Existing relationships within individual faculty interpersonal networks outside the university were viewed as important for increasing enrollment numbers. Faculty may have broad definitions of recruitment, which may differ from administrative definitions of recruitment work, since recruitment can range from intentional, measurable activities to more amorphous awareness-raising work. When respondents cited their own alumni as their best advertisers, this demonstrates, like the respondent who cited their work with community leaders, an understanding of recruitment work by faculty as an interpersonal and intimate process, as held together by continuous networking.

Theme 3: Lack of Support for Recruitment

Faculty emphasized university marketing support, alumni lists, and email lists as very or extremely important for how they engage in recruitment (see Figure 2), indicating a perceived need by faculty for these resources to support their work. They make themselves available and actively participate in recruitment activities. Faculty in the sample reported designing their own marketing materials, orchestrating multi-day recruitment activities at partnering community colleges, and arranging for email campaigns with alumni and external partners. But, as one respondent wrote, “honestly, [I] just need more hours in a day.”

As Figure 2 (on page 20) shows, faculty frequently reported that university marketing support was very important or extremely important to their work in recruitment. Faculty responses do not indicate that there was sufficient marketing support; instead, faculty rated marketing support as very important because they wanted more marketing activity to support their programs. In one example, a faculty member discussed the work required to create a multi-day recruitment event at a local community college that maintains several articulation agreements with the institution. They

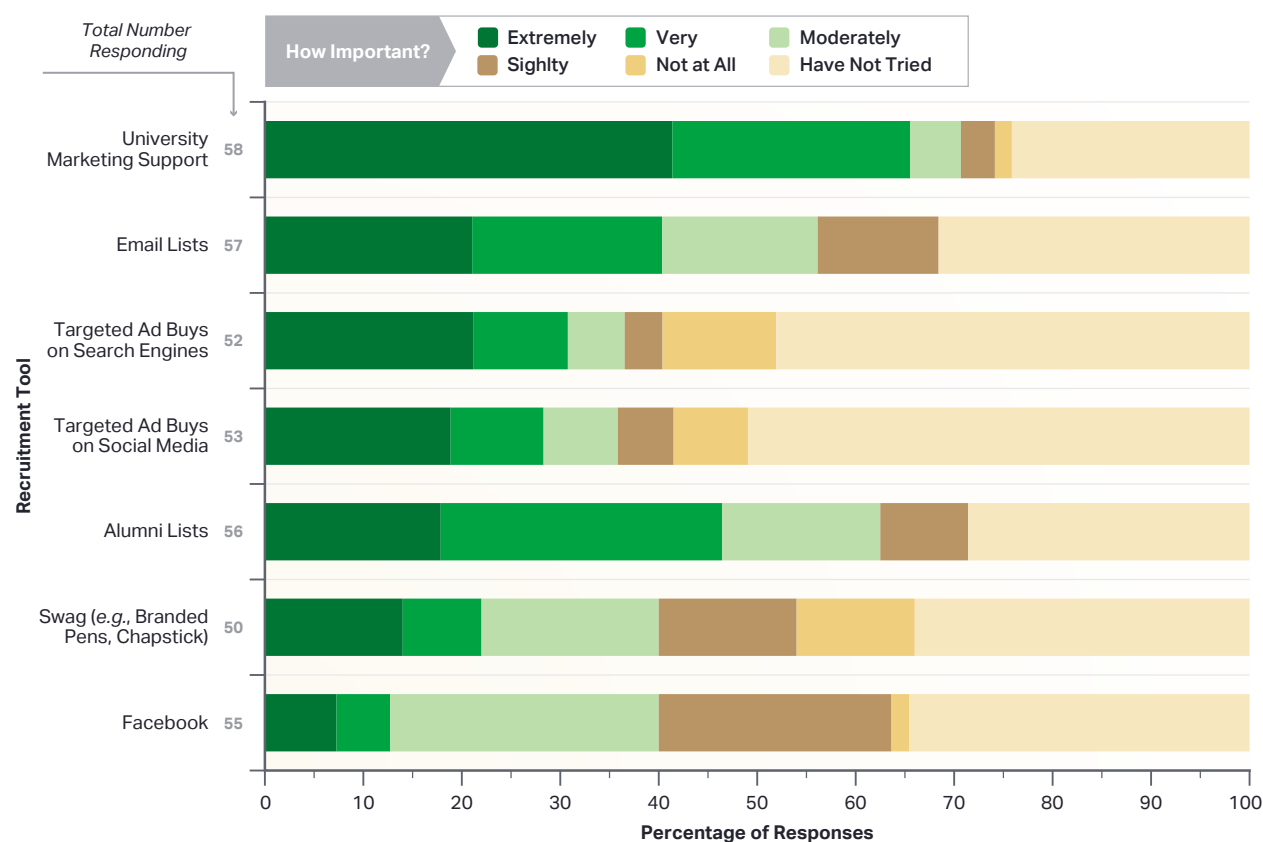


FIGURE 2 ► Faculty Responses on the Importance of Recruitment Tools

noted that it took a surprising amount of “time and orchestration” and that they were entirely responsible: “It was a great way to recruit, but I ended up doing everything myself (rounding up brochures, scheduling with instructors). Yikes—no faculty have time for that.” This type of activity also requires significant digital media production—calendar invites, calendar announcements, flyers, emails, social media posts—a skill set not all faculty have. It also requires significant professional communication with admissions and marketing staff: “I feel like I am driving the bus on recruiting. I have to ask for recruiting emails to be sent. I have to draft the emails. I have to ask for lists of prospective students to be created.” Respondents described the willingness of faculty to drive recruitment efforts, to a point, along with a desire for more recognition and support from university administrative structures when taking on new initiatives.

When asked about specific social media sites, faculty ranked established social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram as slightly or moderately important for their recruitment efforts. However, faculty find TikTok, Instagram, and SnapChat to be less useful at this time, though they reported interest in learning about and participating in university-driven efforts. Faculty who have used social media were most likely to report that LinkedIn was at least slightly important for recruitment purposes, while other sites were less frequently mentioned. (See Figure 3, on page 21.)

That said, more than half of the faculty had not used any social media for recruitment efforts, despite recognizing the importance of these sites. As one respondent put it when discussing social media efforts, “I think if there were some standard templates, many of us would be willing to create our materials and put boots on the ground to support efforts.” This reticence to be involved

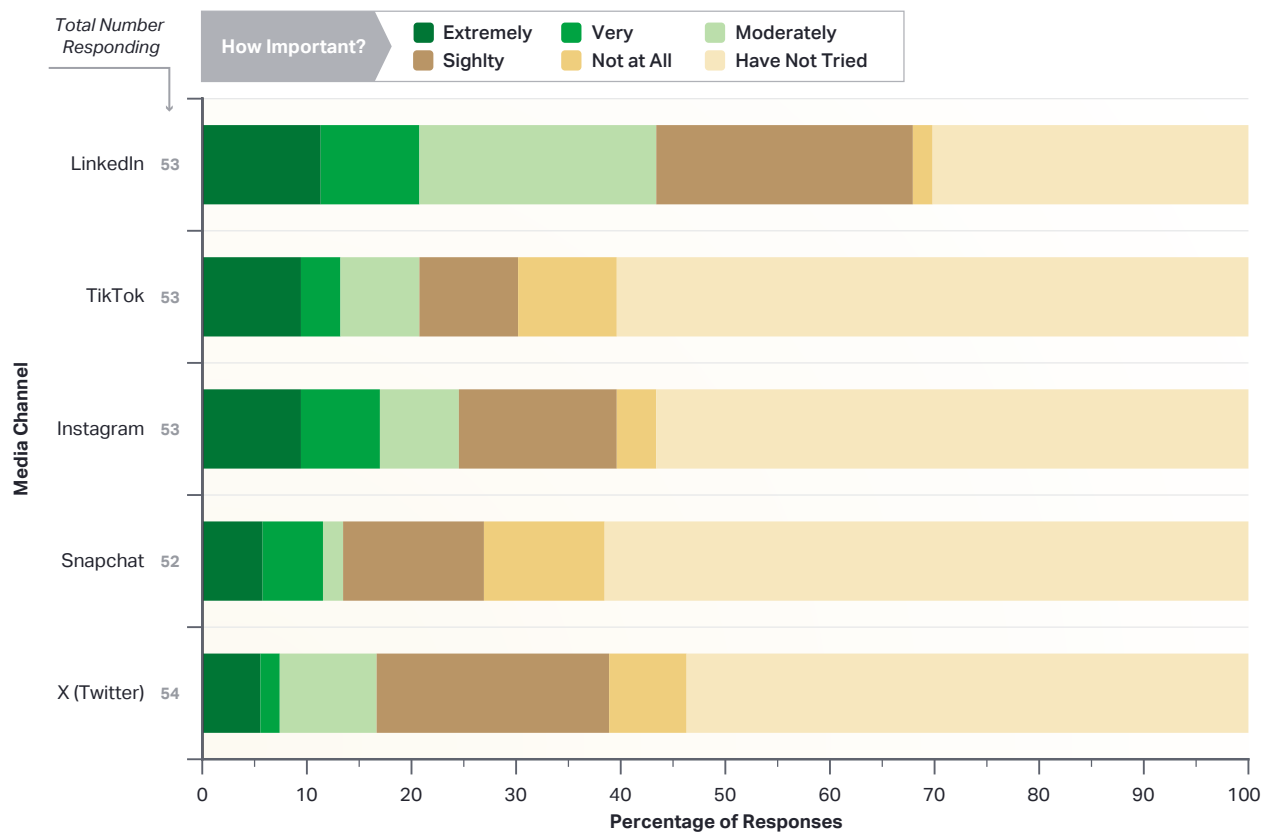


FIGURE 3 ➤ Faculty Responses on the Importance of Social Media

in social media offerings may also be explained by the university's efforts to standardize branding efforts and criticize faculty who deviate from brand standards, as reported by several faculty members in the survey. While the importance of social media is clear, faculty currently do not feel empowered or capable of fully utilizing it in recruitment efforts.

Theme 4: Lack of Compensation for Recruitment

In addition to needing more time in the day to complete tasks, faculty often discussed the lack of compensatory support for engagement in recruitment activities. Some focused their responses on the monetary value of their efforts, but many also felt that the work was devalued by the traditional metrics used to evaluate. Under the complex schemes by which faculty demonstrate their value to the university—generally, tenure and promo-

tion evaluation metrics—recruitment work is not perceived as valuable.

Faculty in the sample reported using their own personal money and resources to promote their programs and increase enrollment; they also serve as their own support staff, handling university tasks like requesting participant email lists from information sessions. As one respondent wrote, "Ask to see my flyers and brochures that I design. Ask to see my bookmarks that I pay for with my own money. Ask to see my (now abandoned) website that I pay for with my own money." Despite investing in this work, faculty were pessimistic about whether the university appreciated or valued this effort: "I think [the] administration doesn't realize how involved we are."

Faculty reported that they were not sufficiently compensated for their recruitment work. For example, one respondent described the lack of support they

were experiencing in a department with graduate programs: “[I]t is our responsibility to lead our marketing and recruitment of students, because we are so different [from] undergrad admissions... This is important work, but so time-consuming, and is not given enough weight in release credits or administrative support.” Some faculty members run graduate programs with unique marketing and advertising needs that they must address on their own, but with very limited release time, which is based on enrollment numbers. For example, one of the authors is the director of three graduate programs with close to 40 students enrolled, but they only receive four credits⁴ of release time. And so, in addition to running the program and maintaining regular functions, there is added pressure for them to increase enrollment on top of very little credit release.

Respondents said that the university undervalues their role by failing to recognize their efforts. A few respondents cited evaluation metrics that do not necessarily honor this work (*e.g.*, promotion and tenure requirements). Several respondents communicated responses similar to this: “Not a part of my job description,” while others expressed problems with collaboration and communication.

These findings highlight a disconnect between faculty commitment to their programs, university expectations for faculty work, and the structural support provided to facilitate recruitment at the university. The themes that have emerged within the dissonance of labor—the value of interpersonal relationships, the importance of faculty relationships with alumni and the community, and the lack of support and compensation—offer valuable insights and recommendations for understanding how to better value faculty within the context of recruitment.

Analysis and Recommendations

The following section synthesizes the findings and themes into recommendations for universities. These recommendations outline tangible actions that institutions can take to improve the recruitment culture within their programs.

The Value of Interpersonal Relationships

Faculty repeatedly emphasized their role in building and maintaining relationships, either with prospective students or with current students (who will eventually become alumni). This work, however, was not only labor-intensive but also not sufficiently valued or recognized by the formal metrics of an academic institution. As the literature suggests, this invisible, relational labor largely falls to women faculty and Faculty of Color (Hanasono, *et al.* 2019), raising important and unresolved questions about equity. The often-unstated expectations surrounding relationship-building work in higher education is something that faculty value deeply and is also difficult to translate into credit toward tenure or promotion.

Recommendations for Effective Collaboration

- *Communicate clear expectations about building and maintaining relationships with prospective students to faculty:* While some faculty members are clear that recruitment activities are “not in the job description,” most take on at least some responsibility for scheduling one-on-one meetings or small group meetings with prospective students. In the interest of building equitable labor practices, institutions may wish to clarify expectations around relationship-building work with faculty. Institutions may also inform faculty about the dynamic ways in which recruitment occurs at institutions. This understanding can help faculty appreciate the non-apparent work that student workers, staff, and administrators contribute to recruitment and facilitate more effective and cohesive collaboration.
- *Help faculty understand how to maintain boundaries in personal relationships:* To protect faculty time, institutions should model healthy boundaries when encouraging faculty participation in recruitment activities. This may include providing templates for automatic replies to prospective students, encouraging faculty to maintain “disconnected” days, or otherwise demonstrating acceptable practices for setting and maintaining boundaries.

⁴ this is four credits of compensation within a 24 credit load.

■ *Foster intentional collaboration between faculty, staff, and administrators in recruitment efforts:* To build a more cohesive and collaborative recruitment culture, institutions should create structured opportunities for faculty to engage with staff and administrators who support student recruitment. This could include joint workshops, recruitment debrief sessions, or cross-functional planning committees that bring together key university staff and administrators to collaborate on initiatives. These interactions can help faculty better understand the expertise, labor, and strategic roles that staff and administrators contribute—work that is often invisible to faculty. Promoting shared language, goals, and processes across roles can cultivate mutual respect, reduce silos, and improve overall coordination and effectiveness in recruitment.

Value Alumni Relations in Dynamic Ways

It was notable that respondents identified alumni as key contributors to their recruitment efforts. The value of alumni in this role is clear—they help communicate the strengths of the programs they completed and bring with them established networks of professionals and community members. These networks can be especially valuable for programs that rely heavily on alumni for recruitment. While this dynamic is familiar to graduate program directors, most respondents in this study teach in undergraduate programs. This indicates that faculty are engaging in alumni networking to support undergraduate recruitment efforts, often outside the formal communication channels maintained by alumni offices.

It is not entirely clear whether faculty understand how to communicate regularly with alumni, but evidence suggests that alumni tend to know best the relationships they built with the faculty from their programs. The connections fostered in academic settings can evolve into productive interpersonal networks that contribute to the long-term success of programs.

Recommendations to Effective Collaboration

■ *Communicate the value of alumni-faculty relationships:* The relationships faculty build with alumni need to be cultivated regularly. These relationships help

build programs that offer students more opportunities, including internships, practicums, job networking, professional development, and more.

■ *Regularly disseminate alumni contact lists:* Regular distribution of alumni contact lists—facilitated through coordinated efforts among university staff, administration, and faculty—can remind faculty of the active alumni connected to their programs. When shared strategically and with clear guidelines, these lists become valuable tools for fostering ongoing relationships that benefit both recruitment and program development. Staff and administrators often maintain the infrastructure and data systems that track alumni engagement, while faculty bring personal connections and disciplinary relevance to those relationships. By working together to manage and utilize alumni information effectively, universities can build stronger, more intentional alumni networks that support institutional goals.

■ *Develop a set of practices and materials that are useful for faculty-alumni interaction:* Make recommendations for how faculty can engage alumni in their classrooms that extend into their regular work. These actions may include regular email communication that keeps alumni informed about current events and the accomplishments of their programs. These might be regular involvement in a course project (e.g., an alumni interview webpage project within an information design course). These acts help remind alumni of their value within the institution.

■ *Integrate alumni into programmatic recruitment efforts:* Not all alumni can contribute in ways that are monetary, but with good learning experiences, they do take pride in their institutions. They could be given opportunities to table programs at recruitment events alongside faculty.

Support Faculty Recruitment Communication

Faculty members rely heavily on traditional communication materials such as web pages, flyers, and brochures to share information about their programs. However, there is a clear need to diversify these materials and adopt more strategic dissemination strategies.

Financial constraints pose a significant barrier to developing and distributing consistent and high-quality communication materials. The current inconsistency in materials reflects poorly on the university and hinders effective communication with students and potential applicants. Additionally, infrequent dissemination of university marketing efforts and alumni lists further complicates this issue.

Recommendations for Effective Collaboration

- *Develop a comprehensive list of recruitment deliverables.* Many faculty members are not aware of the materials that institutional marketing departments develop. They also may not be aware of the breadth of communication materials that are effective in different contexts for recruitment purposes. Likewise, faculty members have key insights into which recruitment deliverables are most effective for their programs. For example, faculty in a creative writing program may have more success recruiting students through printed flyers at local coffee shops than through targeted Google ads.

Faculty should receive a folder or a comprehensive list of recruitment materials that are used to promote and recruit within their programs. These should be regularly distributed and updated. Dissemination and regular communication about these materials help faculty easily access and utilize them in their day-to-day communication.

- *Be transparent about the budget.* If there are changes in the fiscal year budget that directly impact the day-to-day functions of the institution's marketing and admissions departments, ensure this is communicated to faculty.
- *Prioritize programmatic content strategies.* When possible, faculty should be consulted about the content strategies that are most effective for their programs. A content strategy involves the creation, distribution, and measurement of content. While recruitment labor may not be explicitly linked to faculty labor, the respondents in this study helped provide a general understanding about whether the univer-

sity is promoting its programs. Even at universities where individual program marketing isn't possible, regular communication about what marketing accomplishes for the larger institution can help ease their concerns.

Compensate Recruitment Labor

The core issue behind respondents' answers about how they participate in recruitment work was the conflict over whether this activity was considered part of their job. It's important to clearly communicate to all faculty members that their recruitment efforts are explicitly valued through evaluation metrics. Faculty need to understand that the design of a flyer for a course that isn't filling, or the tabling they do at a three-hour evening event for prospective students, is going to "count." It hasn't always been clear what recruitment work counted toward a faculty's tenure or promotion because faculty were less involved in recruitment.

Recommendations for Effective Collaboration

- *Encourage and explicitly value faculty contribution to recruitment activities:* Universities should consider clarifying how labor-intensive recruitment activities will count toward tenure and promotion, such as providing credit for making oneself available for scheduling meetings or participating in open houses or information sessions.
- *Delineate and define recruitment labor.* Without administrative coordination, there can be substantial overlap of recruitment labor that could be better distributed among departments.

Conclusion

When faculty have their work acknowledged and openly appreciated, they are more likely to engage in recruitment activities. For example, when a marketing plan was visualized in a map for faculty to help them better understand where program-specific communication should be integrated, faculty implemented suggestions and saw a 15 percent increase in their graduate student program enrollment (Puckett 2021, 33). While some ex-

perts in recruitment may suggest making enrollment challenges and opportunities clear so that faculty understand that their involvement is crucial (Golden 2024), this communication needs to be complemented with transparency on how this kind of faculty work is worthwhile and valued. When recruitment is aligned with “tangible rewards, institutions can show faculty that their time and energy are valued” (Golden 2024, para. 17).

There remains much to learn about how recruitment expectations are affecting faculty. Faculty who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or women are likely to take on more discursive and less visible forms of labor—practices that may not have been fully captured

by the survey instrument used in this study. Future research focused specifically on these faculty groups may reveal more innovative and community-responsive approaches to recruitment. This study was limited to faculty at Metropolitan State University, but future research aims to include participants from other institutions within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. Expanding the study to a statewide level may provide additional insights into labor and recruitment practices. Further work is also planned to explore recruitment, retention, and the role of faculty. Additional research might examine the effects of incentivizing faculty participation in recruitment efforts.

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