PROACTIVE OUTREACH STRATEGIES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN TRANSFER ENROLLMENTS TO ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS

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Abstract – With engineering technology program enrollments, in some sectors of the United States, in a slow state of decline, faculty and administrators alike must become creative and proactive in creating a recruitment strategy that will re-invigorate the student enrollment population of their programs. For the past several years, a special “outreach” task force has been assembled at Northeastern University’s School of Engineering Technology to help create proactive methodologies for increasing student transfer enrollment numbers. This paper chronicles the steps taken and results seen from a very proactive outreach stance. Items that will be discussed will be; committee creation, committee organization, committee assignments, committee meeting structure, marketing, technical organizational issues, creating a reasonable two-year school to four-year school education path rational, dealing with two year college administrators, site visit scheduling, creative design of presentations, methodologies in giving site visit presentations, transfer credit issues, follow-up reinforcement, continuous improvement in this process, and fruits of this process. In addition, this “outreach” methodology is intended to be extended to the industrial sector wherein the outreach-faculty and staff approach industry partners whose employees may need encouragement to continue their education toward an Associates or Bachelors degree.

Index Terms – Outreach, Recruitment, Community College, Corporate, Site-Visit, Marketing

BACKGROUND

The student enrollments in the School of Engineering Technology (SET)- the technology day program, and the Lowell Institute School (LIS)- the technology part time evening program at Northeastern University have seen fluctuations and some declines in their respective student enrollments. This is also common to many engineering technology programs across the country. In order to continue to maintain a viable technology program, there must be a reasonable student population in order to sustain such a program. [1] In 2004, a meeting was held with the university Provost to address this issue. A strong suggestion was made that we focus on additional transfer student enrollment. The faculty and administrators agreed and set out to develop a methodology to increase student enrollment transfer. In addition, it was strongly emphasized that the evening program should also be made stronger by a proactive corporate recruitment program.[2] Several weeks later, a task force was created, whose mission was to determine the reasons for and implement an appropriate course of action that would assist in stemming this current declining enrollment trend in both the day and evening technology programs.

CREATING THE TASK FORCE

An “outreach” committee task force was created and made up of the following members.

- Committee Chair
- Department Director
- Department Assistant Director – Day program
- Department Assistant Director – Evening program
- Electrical Engineering Technology Program Coordinator
- Mechanical Engineering Technology Program Coordinator
- Computer Engineering Technology Program Coordinator
- Ad-Hoc Interested Faculty

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EARLY AGENDA

The following items were issues that needed to be resolved in order to have some tangible substance to work with when recruiting at the academic and corporate sites mentioned.

1. Determine the target schools and demographics
2. Determine the target industries and demographics
3. Creating an “innovative” and specialized brochure – day program
4. Creating an “innovative” and specialized brochure – part time evening program
5. Creating “innovative” presentations to be presented at target schools
6. Creating “innovative” presentations to be presented at corporate sites
7. Supplemental items that will affect the success of this project

There is an old saying in the marketing field – “know your audience.” To this end, the committee spent a great deal of time and effort in determining the make-up of the target academic and corporate audience needed for the required goal and mission.

ACADEMIC AUDIENCE

It was determined that the most “reasonable” place to start were to target schools that were located at a reasonable distance from our institution. In addition, two-year schools that were located in states that touched Massachusetts were also compiled. The rationale for this is obvious. Students from these schools would find it easier to commute to this institution if it were within a reasonable distance from them. Again, this is just a starting point. A list of such two-year institutions, including community colleges was created and stored in a newly crafted database. In addition to the names of these institutions, other information about these institutions such as addresses, phone numbers, contact persons, and existing programs of study were also included. We will speak more about the details of this later.

CORPORATE AUDIENCE

It was determined that there existed a large enough group of corporate entities that were supplying students to the evening program (although in smaller numbers), that this list would be used and added to when necessary.

CREATING THE MARKETING BROCHURES

In order to create a compelling brochure, it was determined that the target audience, the students at these two year institutions along with potential students from corporate industry, would best understand what continuing their educations would mean to them by actually showing them, through past graduates of our program, their own success stories. To this end, two separate marketing brochures were crafted, where each would focus on their own demographic and tell a specific story relative to that demographic. Both day and evening program graduates were contacted and asked to participate in this project. The response by past day and evening program students was overwhelming. Students were more than willing to supply information that could be used to promote their former engineering technology program. Some of the informational items requested were as follows.

- Name
- Year of graduation
- Program of Study
- Degree received
- Current Title
- Name of Current Employer
- Job Description
- Your experience at Northeastern University’s Engineering Technology Program and its cooperative program
- Current Salary Range
- (A current photo of you at your work place. If unable to supply this, a photo of you standing in front of your company’s sign or logo in front of your building-outside)
Using this information, the Northeastern University publications department was contacted and recruited to help in creating an appropriate professional brochure. Working with this department in addition to an independent outside graphics and professional writer, a brochure was crafted. After many careful iterations and reviews, which met the entire criterion that was set by the Outreach Committee, two brochures were born. Keep in mind that creating such a brochure is not an easy task as anything involving academics, politics, complex university rules and the like will always lead to general chaos and delays in project completion dates.

**SUPPLEMENTAL OUTREACH MEETING AGENDA ITEMS**

During discussions at various outreach meeting, which were and are still currently held once a week, several ideas were discussed.

- **Committee Assignments**

  It was generally decided that there were two major site visit possibilities. First there was the traditional “college Fair” site visit. Second, there is the actual two-year school on-site visit. Keep in mind that it is extremely important to assign the appropriate individuals to these tasks. Most of the time they are not interchangeable. Not everyone can promote and execute a two-year school on-site visit properly. Remember, this is not an English paper academic recitation exercise. This is an important task that must be performed by the most capable people in order to be successful. As a chairperson, the decision must be made as to whom can best serve these tasks. Extreme care in this selection must be made – without political influence. Improperly selecting people for these tasks could conceivably be devastating and perhaps render the exercise useless.

- **Student Participation**

  It was decided that current engineering technology students were to be recruited when possible to help with site visits. The reasoning for this was that students at two-year schools would feel more comfortable speaking and relating to their peers and allow those students to get a closer sense of reality from them.

- **Visit Mementos**

  Among the informational materials that were to be distributed during the site visit to the two-year graduates would be an information form for future contact. Prospective transfer students would need to fill out this form prior to the completion of this visit. These forms would then be immediately collected. It was decided that a “special” pen of reasonable quality (and imprinted with the department contact information) would be given to each participant to not only fill out this form, but to keep. Folks always feel good when they receive a free gift – especially if it is utilitarian. Most folks will not throw away a pen that “feels” professional and expensive and “writes” well. In addition to giving the students a small token of thanks for listening, they will also act as a moving advertisement for your program as they will undoubtedly take this wherever they go – at least until the ink runs out!

- **Site Pre and Post Visit Forms**

  Since accumulating site visit information is extremely important, especially for future visit decisions, a form was created that would have a dual purpose.

  1. The first half of the form would contain all of the necessary contact information that would be needed to guide and prep the visiting recruiting team members prior to their actually setting foot on site.

  2. The second half of the form would contain information that dealt with the actual site visit. Such items such as – names of faculty present, names of administrators present, titles of all of these folks, contact information of all of these folks, the number of students present, and the programs of study that these students were participating in along with their possible future areas of study.
• Scheduling Visits

Scheduling site visit times and dates is another extremely important issue. At some point, a two-year school administrator will say, “YES!” to your request for a visit. A time and date must then be set that is mutually agreeable to all participating parties.

1. Have available the teaching schedules of all of those who are considered as potential site-visit people.
2. Common weekly day/time periods must be selected ahead of time (prior to contacting the two-year school administrator) and all involved committee members must agree to them.
3. It must be made clear that when called upon, appropriate committee members must conduct the site visit of the two-year school in question. Determine if that will be a problem for anyone ahead of time.
4. During the time of contact, the dates and times will now be available for discussion with that administrator.

Keep in mind that memories fade rather quickly, depending who is making the site visit. It is best to keep a paper trail of all of the necessary information while it is fresh in your mind. Obviously this information can now be used for future prospecting at the particular school of interest. By the way, a file system should be set up to maintain all of this data, again for future reference and prospecting.

ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH TWO YEAR SCHOOLS

From the informational database that was constructed, contact information can be extracted and used to make initial contact with the appropriate (or perceived appropriate) school administrators. Again, it is very important to select the right person or persons to make these initial contacts. From experience, electing the wrong people to conduct this initial phone contact could mean failure.

Keep in mind that the contact information that is in your initial database may not be correct. As determined through experience, administrators tend to change positions frequently in an academic environment, especially at small two-year institutions.

SELLING YOUR SITE VISIT

Once contact has indeed been made, with the correct administrator, the process of selling your “site visit” concept begins. Keep in mind that it is and has been very easy for most administrators to simply request that you visit their school during a “standard” college fair period. At this point, it is extremely important for the rational of the need for this visit be explained. By doing so, the administrator will immediately see the differences between the two and the benefits of your intended site visit. The explanation for this visit must primarily focus on the student’s wellbeing and educational future. Keep in mind as to what may be going on in the listener’s mind. They certainly may be thinking.

“If I invite this guy up to my school, I may have to invite every other school in the world that asks for a visit. That could certainly place a strain on my time, my student’s time and our resources. I don’t think this is a good idea!”

This is not what you want your listening administrator to be thinking. So the focus must not initially be on transferring to your school, but rather to promote further student education in general for two year students by explaining the future academic and financial benefits of moving on to a four or five year bachelor degree program. It must be made clear that it is important for the student to consider this no matter where they may transfer. The most important thing is that they consider getting a four-year bachelors degree in this current market environment. Supporting this idea must be followed by a statement that implies that in this day and age, a student will be seriously limited in earning potential with just an Associates degree. Utmost care and sensitivity must be given to the listening audience as not to insult their two-year school achievements. Remember that these students and administrators alike have all worked very hard to their individual goals.

Once this is established, it can then be emphasized that your visit will focus on a continued technology program path that utilizes the materials they have acquired in attaining their Associates degree at their current institution and that the technology program they would transfer to will allow them a continuous path of education in the technology arena. In
addition, as is the case for this author’s school, there are several technology program cross-disciplinary choices that can be made. This is why it is strongly emphasized and very necessary for the “right” person, one who is experienced with the program and is also a capable and engaging, humorous, and passionate speaker, to perform this initial contact with the two-year school administrator. This initial contact dialog can certainly be a deal maker or breaker for this visit. In fact, if successful, chances are that you will be invited back with less effort than you needed during this initial interaction. Lastly, like a job interview, you may be asked to speak with another administrator who may be more closely aligned with the particular program you are interested in. If so, you need only to repeat the scenario that has already been explained to the initial person contacted.

**ENCOUNTERING AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

Experience has shown that the process of contacting two-year institutions requires some strategic planning. Of prime importance is determining the appropriate time (of the year) to make initial solicitations. This somewhat depends on the particular two-year school and its needs. For example and from experience, contact with a number of schools was initiated throughout the “normal” semester academic year. It was determined that the closer to the start of the semester of these schools that contact was initiated, the more likely of a successful site invitation. Remember, getting invited for an on-site visit is not automatic. This may be new ground for many of the two-year schools that are being contacted. What is known is that likelihood of a successful invitation seems to happen if contact is made near the beginning of the semester of that institution.

Contact initiated late in a semester seems to be very problematic for most schools. Most schools contacted here have said that they do not have time to fit a visit into their schedules due to the limited amount of time left for them to complete their required classroom curriculum materials. But in all cases, interest was expressed and the two-year school administrator or faculty member suggested a visit at the beginning of the next semester.

**MAKING THE SITE VISIT**

The authors of this paper conducted many site visits. Each one in itself has been a learning process. Some of the items that have been adopted due to this are the following. [3]

1. Make contact directly via phone is possible or e-mail or both the day before the site trip is to take place.
   - Often, things come up and the two-year institution administrators may cancel visits. It is much easier if contact is made the day before to put a final confirmation on the visit as this may save a lot time and unnecessary travel for the visiting team.

2. If you do not have a GPS system to help guide your travel to the two-year institution, it is suggested, if needed, that an Internet travel guide such as Map-Quest© be used to aid in this travel process.
   - This method has been used with great success. Many schools may be located some distance from home. Using this can make the difference between making the appointment on time or not.

3. Make sure that all of the necessary materials; laptop computer, projector, software presentations, brochures, mementos, extension cords, Business Cards, and any other items that could cause a negative appearance are packed well ahead of time.
   - First impressions are extremely important. Do not give the two-year school administrators the impression that you are not fully prepared. Just like the Boy/Girl Scouts, you must ----“Be Prepared!”

4. Pay attention to time constraints. Leave early enough to be on time for your presentation
   - Again first impressions are extremely important. Do not give the two-year school administrators the impression that you did not put any planning into your trip…Plan ahead - time wise!

5. It is far better to have two site visitors then one. From experience, there is a lot of set up that needs to be done prior to giving the presentations and only a limited amount of time to do it all.
   - From experience, it seems that the welcoming administrators may like to talk to you while you are setting up. This is great but can impede the actual setup process. A suggestion would be to have one person do the talking and appease the administrator while the other person actually sets up the materials. As part of the
set-up, materials may need to be distributed to the attendees. The second person should do this chore, again while the first person is speaking with the administrators.

6. From experience, it has been shown that simply placing materials on a table so that students can pick them up, similar to a college fair, absolutely does not work for this type of venue.
   - This is very important. If you want all of the attendees to have copies of the materials you have brought, these materials must be handed out directly to each attendee prior to the start of the presentation. This should be done by the person who has been designated to set up the materials in the beginning as noted in part 5.

7. When multiple presentations are given, it is best for one person to be the speaker and the other to run the slide presentation. When the initial speaker has completed their presentation, the roles of these two people should now be reversed, if there is need for an additional presentation by the alternate person.
   - Remember that there may be serious time constraints placed on the allotted visit. Care must be taken to utilize the time in the most efficient manner possible. Stay on the agreed to schedule even it means shortening your prepared presentation. Again, this is where planning ahead is important.

8. Following the presentations, time must be allotted for possible, and encouraged, Q & A.
   - The idea here is to get intimate with the students and make them feel like they are part of the process. Encourage dialog interaction with them.

9. Consider sponsoring simple refreshments such as “finger food: such as pizza.
   - The idea here is to make your audience, the students, be as comfortable as possible.

**Student Issues and Concerns**

Several important issues came to light during various Q & A sessions that followed our presentations that very well may apply to others. The following is a list of extreme concerns to potential transfer students. [4]

1. Financial Aid and its associated issues
2. Course Transfer credit and its associated issues
3. Student housing
4. Commutability – traveling to and from school

**Financial Aid Issues**

Most state run community colleges and other two year institutions traditionally have lower tuition rates than traditional private four or five year institutions. Students attending these schools have a willingness to transfer to these private schools but are skeptical about whether they can really afford the tuition. This seems to be their gating issue. With growing tuition rates at private schools nationally, students are very interested in hearing about possible ways that would help to defray the cost of this major financial burden. Aside from the traditional student loan programs that are available, other sources of funding may also be available. There are a lot of student scholarships available from a variety of sources most of which never see the light of day. It may take a lot of administrative work time, but it is possible to locate many non-traditional scholarships. The interesting thing about this is that these scholarship awards, whose criteria are extremely varied, are available to anyone who wants to take the time and seek them out. In other words, they are available to anyone at any school across the country.

The fact that these scholarships are available to anyone is reason for only mentioning them in a non-detail way during a site visit. Since it is these students that are being courted for transfer to your school, it would not be wise to divulge a list of the exact application information associated with each of these scholarships. After all, in reality you are making this site visit to promote transfer to your school not someone else’s.

Another possible source of scholarship funding came to light during a recent visit to a local community college here in Massachusetts. During post visit dialog with several of the transfer coordinators, financial concerns were discussed. In that
conversation, it was suggested that a transfer scholarship be set up for academically deserving students. This is an exceptional idea. In fact, there are many ways that this could be designed and administered. The details of this will not be discussed here and left to the reader to conjure for him or herself.

The financial issues associated with transferring to a private school are not easy ones to deal with, but are nonetheless there and will not go away. Creative methods must be devised so that promising students from these two-year schools can continue their educations.

It is also necessary to mention income-generating sources that that are specific to your institution. Whether these are in the form of work-study during the year, summer internships, and as in the case for Northeastern University, cooperative work positions as well as summer research programs that the student may qualify for.

Transfer Credit Issues

This is and will always be a major issue among transfer students and their respective two-year schools. Students who have participated in a two-year education want with good reason, as much transfer credit as they can get. After all, they may reason, each has just spent two years of their lives in a process that just awarded them an “official” Associates degree in their major. What they would like is a course for course credit transfer. What they don’t realize is that course content from school to school will vary in many areas. Giving straight across the board credit may do more harm then good to the student.

At some point in history, interested two-year and four-year schools got together and had a discussion about transferring courses. In those discussions, the words “articulation agreement” were born. From that time onward two-year schools were only interested in “articulation agreements” which were essentially course for course credits. In today’s market, many things have changed. The complexity of courses in a student’s major are much more formidable then in the past. Technology and hence course content is in a continuous state of evolution and flux. Courses now take on many different design structures. There are still many courses that can be directly transferred but the majority of technical courses within a student’s major must be closely examined.

A possible solution, at least for this author’s academic program, is to make it clear to the two-year school administrators and site-visit attending students that it is not only important and beneficial to have their students transfer to a given 4-year program, but more importantly to have them succeed in that endeavor. There are many technical courses that are made up of a sequence of courses. (i.e. Electronics I, Electronics II etc ). If the necessary content for the first course in this sequence is not covered, the student will ultimately have a very difficult time in the follow on course. By giving that student credit for a course that “he/she” thinks is equivalent and in reality is not is setting up the student for failure. There is a whole list of reasons why articulation in its strictest form is not viable in this current market. These alternate reasons will not be discussed here but it will be sufficient to say that due to the vast and varied course content and structures, a better method of examining transfer credit must exist – and it does.

With the ever-evolving complex maze of course structures and content, an obvious solution to transfer credit is to evaluate the student’s transcript course content as a snapshot of their transferable education. What this actually means is that each student’s transcript of courses must be evaluated as a total picture of that student. In other words, multiple courses may have to be combined in order to make use of those courses for transfer credit and at the same time be compatible with the student’s new course curriculum. In fact, many times these course combinations can also be used toward required technical electives that must be eventually taken.

This method of “snapshot” transfer credit has been very successful. In dialog with past transfer students all totally agree that this snapshot method accords them the greatest amount of transfer value with little loss in credit. But, this all takes time. Schools serious about obtaining great transfer students should understand the value in spending this precious time in the evaluation of transfer student transcripts. The results of such an evaluation will no doubt result in a student that is well equipped to complete their upper level academic education.

Student Housing & Commutability

This issue is important to transfer students as many live a good non-commuting distance from the school they would be transferring to. Students are always interested in their options here. Make it clear to them just what these options are and the possible costs involved including possible commuting routes from their current school as an example for them.
CORPORATE RECRUITING

The last item here involves corporate recruiting of potential “part-time” evening students. It is quite obvious that the pool of potential students from industry can come from two major sources. These are:

- Existing companies that currently supply a student body to the program
- New companies that have yet to supply any students to the program

In either case, it is important that, similar to the two-year school site visits, corporate site visits must be planned and initiated. It is mentioned here only for completeness and the emphasis currently being undertaken by this department has been of the recruitment of transfer students from two-year colleges.

In order to maintain a strong day program, a strong companion evening program must be in place. The recruitment of students from both of these precious sources is a necessity but most schools have limited resources. The people that work on the recruiting and outreach committees are for the most part full time teaching academics with full time teaching loads etc. From experience, it has been shown that it is very possible to recruit a substantial amount of students from both sectors, but only if there is enough time and financial support to do so. It is the intent here that these precious resources will be available in the near future.

SUMMARY

If organized and executed properly, students from both two-year institutions and new students from the corporate sector can be recruited with success. [6] Forethought and organization is the key. There is no substation for a good “outreach” committee. Persistence is the key. We have all heard and seen where lawyers state, “Never ask a question that you do not already know the answer to.” This is just what is required to be successful in this domain. Always be prepared with the answers to potential questions that you may receive from administrators in both the academic world and the corporate world. A successful recruiting campaign can be achieved only with the cooperation of your colleagues in your group along with the homework you do.

At this point in our recruiting process, it is too early to be able to give numerical statistics as to how successful these efforts have been. Feedback will be a gradual process and perhaps begin in the next Fall semester. But there is one thing for certain, if one does not try, one will never know, but being prepared and organized is always a strong component toward a successful campaign.

REFERENCES