Recruitment Strategies for Industrial Technology Programs

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Introduction

Today's competitive marketplace requires many colleges and universities to search for ways to maintain or increase their program enrollment numbers. One method is to focus on an enrollment management program with an emphasis placed on retention efforts for existing students. Although this is one important issue facing many colleges and universities, it is not the only method for maintaining or enhancing enrollment figures. The need is to focus on both retention efforts as well as the recruitment of prospective students to provide the foundation to build enrollment numbers.

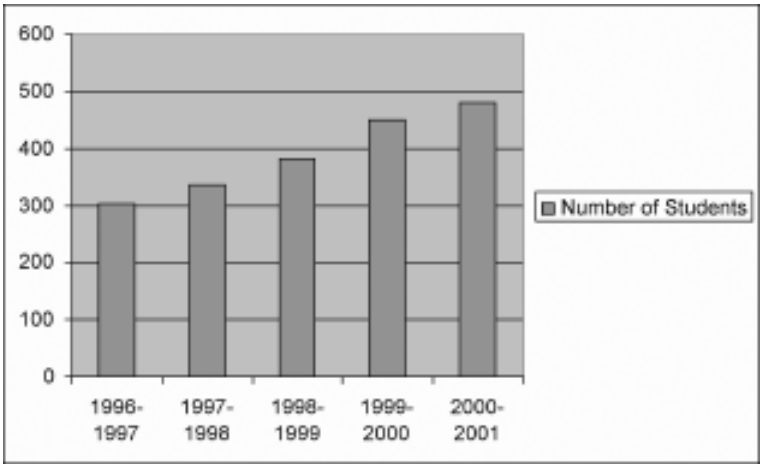
Competition in starting salaries of graduates from business and/or engineering programs can make it challenging to recruit students into industrial technology programs. Further, it is predicted that as technology continues changing at a rapid pace the new jobs created will require additional education (Brandon, 1997). Coupled with this are projections of a shrinking labor supply and increased competition among educators for their respective programs. The interest in the field of industrial technology is evident, but it is imperative to make students aware of both industrial technology programs and career opportunities. Educators need to be proactive in recruiting students to meet society's increasing employment needs and for maintaining or strengthening their enrollment numbers and even more so ensure the quality of the students.

In order to meet the challenging demands of student recruitment, industrial technology educators must leverage their recruitment strategies that specifically highlight industrial technology disciplines. The general focus of this article is to share a broad overview of several recruitment strategies that have proven effective at a regional university located in the Midwest.

Departmental Enrollment

Enrollment in the Department of Industrial Technology at the University of Northern Iowa has increased at a steady rate over a five-year period. With a growth of 62.7% in five years, the department has gone from 295 majors in 1996 to 480 majors in 2001 (see Figure 1). With 97% of the 13,533 students enrolled in the university coming from Iowa high schools and community colleges, the enrollment increase is due in part to recruiting efforts from these educational institutions. A strategic recruitment plan was designed to generate students and gradually increase enrollment over a five-year period. The strategic plan was successful, and the increase in enrollment resulted from four different reasons: (a) an increasing number of incoming freshmen to the university, (b) transfer students from two-year programs, (c) an on-going recruitment effort by a full-time recruitment coordinator, and (d) the efforts of faculty, staff, and current students.

Figure 1. Enrollment increases in Department of Industrial Technology at University of Northern Iowa.



According to Zargari, Devier, and Schumm (1999), comprehensive transfer agreements between community colleges and universities need to be established to increase student enrollment. Administrators at two- and four-year institutions seeking articulation agreements can benefit through improved student retention rates and cost savings (McDuffie & Stevenson, 1995; Wattenbarger & Witt, 1995). One of the most important reasons for developing articulation agreements is to improve access by giving students more options and smoothed pathways to achieving degree completion (Bryant, 2001). The Department of Industrial Technology realizes the benefits of this partnership, and articulation agreements have been and will continue to be a vital asset to the enrollment increase in the department. In 1998 the Department of Industrial Technology created and approved 60 articulation agreements with Iowa community colleges. Three years later the department had a total of 317 different articulation agreements with all 15 of Iowa's community colleges. The university has a different agreement with almost every associate of applied science degree at the various community colleges in the state. In 1999, the university had a total of 1,114 transfer students with nearly 70% coming from Iowa two-year colleges (Carlson & Wyatt, 1999). Of the 1,114 transfer students, the Department of Industrial Technology had 58 students transfer into its programs in 1999-2000. Further, during the academic year 2001-2002, the number of transfer students increased to 76, and by the academic year 2003-2004, the transfer students increased to 114. The university expects to see additional increases in students transferring from Iowa community colleges as more departments generate articulation agreements for their programs.

Enrollment Trends

To examine the enrollment trends of industrial technology programs within the state of Iowa, data contained in the *Industrial Teacher Education Directories* (Bell, 1997, 1998, 1999) were analyzed. The three-year period reviewed for this analysis is reflective of the University of Northern Iowa's departmental recruitment plan that was initiated in 1996. Edmunds (1990) established that the use of directories is germane for quantitative analysis of such programs. The data reviewed are aggregate numbers for the state during the three respective years of the initiated marketing study. The aggregate numbers were compiled to use as a baseline for comparing the enrollment growth at the University of Northern Iowa to the growth in the industrial technology program at Iowa State University.

Based on the data reported in the *Industrial Teacher Education Directories* from 1996 to 1999, enrollment growth of industrial technology programs in Iowa experienced an increase of 11.6%. In 1997, the total number of degrees granted from four-year institutions having the degree discipline of industrial technology or technology education was 172. The number of degrees granted in 1998 was 169, and in 1999 the number increased to 192. It is important to note that these aggregate numbers represent all degrees granted in the disciplines including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

There are limitations when using secondary data for analyzing trends in enrollment figures. However, this analysis was performed to establish a baseline for comparison of growth in industrial technology programs statewide as compared to departmental initiatives. It is worth noting that the growth in industrial technology programs appears to have occurred across all emphases within the discipline.

Recruitment

Educational institutions have many strategies for recruiting students, but awareness of the program seems to be a key factor for industrial technology. When the department designed its recruitment plan in 1996, a vast span of recruitment programs was created to either bring students to the Department of Industrial Technology or to take industrial technology program information to them. After initial attempts in recruiting, the department focused on bringing prospective students on campus to highlight the department and programs. The plan has proven effective and enrollment has continued to increase.

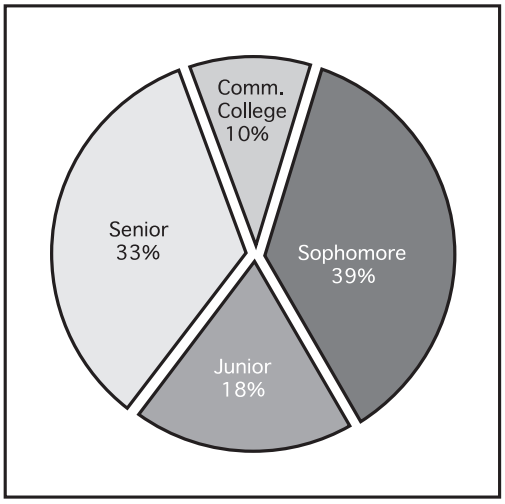
One of the department's largest recruiting tools is the Industrial Technology Day. For one day each semester, the department brings in

about 125 students from Iowa's high schools and community colleges to view the department, receive program information, and gain hands-on experience. During this half-day event, students are able to see what industrial technology has to offer both from an educational and career opportunities standpoint. The sessions relate to the nine different emphasis areas to major in within the department, of which students can select three to participate in. A breakdown of student participants from a recent IT Day is shown in Figure 2. Faculty, staff, and college students coordinate the sessions and design them so the IT Day participants can view a variety of areas within the major. At the end of the day, questionnaires are given to each student for an evaluation and comments concerning the IT Day. The responses have been positive with students commenting on the benefits of the hands-on experience, viewing the labs, and being able to work directly with faculty, staff, and college students. They also appreciated working on and designing a project and having something to take home with them. This day has been an effective method in recruiting students by bringing them to campus to consider the department and learn the benefits of choosing a major area of emphasis in industrial technology.

Survey of Impact

A multimedia recruitment survey was compiled in the spring of 1999 and sent to Iowa's 420 high schools and 17 community colleges. Guidance counselors were asked about video, CD-ROM, and Internet use by students to acquire college and career information. When asked about videotape usage, 73% surveyed stated that their students use videos for this purpose, whereas 68% used CD-ROMs for college and career information. Internet use is the most effective tool; 96% of the counselors surveyed acknowledged this usage for their students because of easy access and availability.

Figure 2. Student breakdown for IT Day, Spring 2000.



This survey helped to determine future recruitment tactics and proved the Department of Industrial Technology's hands-on method of recruiting highly effective in attaining our recruitment goals. Although schools suggested that students use the multimedia references, they still prefer to go to the college or job site for information. Before our recruitment push took place, videos were sent to requesting high schools and community colleges, but feedback was never received concerning interested students. However, when recruiting efforts started to bring students to campus, responses were positive and enrollment also increased. The multimedia survey was done to help determine if changes needed to be made on the recruitment strategy after four years or if the plan was still on track. Although the hands-on method of recruiting has been valuable, there are additional tactics utilized to strengthen the department's goal.

Scholarships are an important emphasis in our recruitment plan. The Department of Industrial Technology gives more than 35 scholarships yearly to freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students. Many of these scholarships are full tuition and are used to recruit students and to reward current students. Other areas of importance relating to the recruitment goals are student organizations, high school outreach programs, the NAIT interactive CD-ROM, exhibitions at conferences, and advertising in magazines.

Conclusion

There are many aspects impacting enrollment figures at the start of the 21st century. The tightening labor supply, new workplace skills, and increases in starting salaries for shortage areas influence students' choice of programs and the resulting enrollment numbers.

Enrollment figures for the state of Iowa are growing at a nominal rate within the field of industrial technology. The growth for the state during the period of this study was 14.2%. As a comparison, the growth realized at the University of Northern Iowa for the same period after implementing a strategic marketing plan was 62.7%. This increase in enrollment is a positive indicator of program viability and a strong commitment to a systematic marketing design.

To maintain existing enrollment figures and increase future enrollment numbers, educators will need to cast a wide net utilizing a cross-discipline marketing strategy. A commitment to perform continuous recruiting to provide growth in enrollment figures and fully utilizing the resources at hand (i.e., faculty, staff, advisory boards, recent industrial technology graduates) is a key component of a successful recruitment strategy.

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