

ABSTRACT

Attracting Students to the Major

The Role and Responsibility of the Department Chair

1. Why the admissions office can't do it alone.

A Department Chair, it certainly can be argued, has more than enough to do without having to worry about the process of attracting students to the major. There are staffing issues, administrative issues, facilities issues, pedagogical issues, and of course, a teaching load and likely a research load, all vying for the time, attention, and sometime patience of even the most conscientious chair. Moreover, there is an entire Admissions Office in place whose sole purpose is to bring students to the institution who wish to major in the subjects it offers, and perhaps an Enrollment Management VP to oversee that department's efforts. So why does this subject need to concern a Department Chair who has so many other things to worry about?

There are three important reasons why a Department Chair should accept (in fact, embrace) the role of "Recruiter in Chief" of his or her department. The first is because it is a job that no one else is taking on directly: the admissions office is charged with the responsibility of producing a class, and while that implicitly means they are going to find students who will be interested in majoring in the your department's subject area, they are explicitly working not for your department, but for the College as a whole. The department whose chair elects to engage with the admissions office in a collaborative way to help bring in a class that has strong interest in that department's major, is likely to end up with more majors than another department which absents itself from the admissions process altogether, or who only gives the process begrudging support.

The second reason why a Department Chair should engage in the process of student recruitment is because it is increasingly critical to the health of the College. Simply put, admissions offices can't do it all on their own any more.

It used to be the case, at most institutions, that the admissions process was highly predictable, and that the admissions office could function relatively autonomously (sometimes too much so) and predictably to "bring in the class" every year. Other than needing to be in touch periodically with academic department heads about changing details of their program that would need to find their way in to the college catalog, the admissions office could be relied upon to do its job with minimal involvement of faculty or department heads. That was then, when the institutions were in charge of the process; this is now, and the market is in charge.

We are all familiar with so-called "admissions funnel." Each year, into the top of that funnel is poured names—thousands of them—accumulated from alumni and friends of the college, guidance officers at targeted secondary institutions with which the college may have an established

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relationship, and purchased lists of college bound students who have agreed to have their names shared with prospective colleges, and who “fit the profile” of your institution.

The work of student recruitment, of course, is the work of building an incoming class for your college. It begins by your admissions office endeavoring to convince a large number of the most qualified students whose names were dropped into the funnel to apply—to become applicants. How many do so is a function of many variables, including how well matched the prospect pool is to the college in terms of its program and selectivity, how good the promotional materials are in “revealing” the college in compelling ways, how effective the admissions office is in attracting the prospect to the campus, and how compelling the campus visit is.

Of those prospects that are moved to apply, of course, not all will be admitted. The percentage of applicants that are admitted varies from college to college, depending on the selectivity of a given school, and how well matched its prospect pool is to the institution itself.

The “funnel” continues to narrow as the process moves beyond the offer of admissions to the point where a (usually) nominal and refundable registration fee is paid by the admitted student in order to secure his/her place in the class. At this point, what started as a process involving thousands of prospects, has been distilled down to a few hundred (in the case of most CIC colleges and universities) depositors.

But the funnel narrows still further at this point, as the admissions office sweats out the summer awaiting the final verdict—the number of students who actually show up in the fall. There are myriad reasons why a student who has deposited decides ultimately not to enroll—it maybe because of an improved financial aid package from competitor schools, a confirming campus visit that didn’t go well, or a change of heart precipitated by events or influences beyond the control of the college.

There is no need to delve deeply into the intricacies of this process here, which plays out differently from institution to institution, but it is important, when considering your own role in the recruitment process, to realize that the process itself is difficult and complicated for your future students and for your admissions staff alike. It may sometimes seem to you that your institution’s advantages (hopefully manifest particularly in your department) should effectively be able to speak for themselves, but the reality is that every college, from Harvard to Williams, Hiram and Wells, needs to sell itself to prospective students and their parents. And while it may seem sometimes that the admissions office is “off doing its own thing” at your college—seemingly detached from the day to day business of the college, in fact its work is intimately tied to the work of the faculty—work that it must represent to a fresh crop of prospective students each and every year.

The admissions funnel concept is misleading in one sense: it makes it sound as though the process is, if not easy, at least orderly and predictable. (A certain number come into the process, and the process yields so many students.) But two major developments have entered a considerable amount of uncertainty into this process that’s unnerving many an admissions office: the global economic crisis, and Web 2.0.

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First, the easy one: The global economic crisis has simultaneously devastated many prospective students college savings, thereby putting extraordinary new pressure on the financial aid system, and it has wrecked havoc on college endowments, thereby reducing a college's ability to make itself affordable to the students it desires to attract. Public University admissions offices have their challenges dealing with record number of applications; but private college admissions offices, especially the mission driven/tuition dependent ones, are, with good reason, feeling enormous pressure, and great concern that the predictive modeling they have refined over years, which has helped them to recruit the right number of the right students, will prove to no longer work.

Now, the more complex one: The Internet Age has changed the way all things are bought and sold, including a college education. Consumers (in our case prospective students) have much more control over the purchasing process than used to be the case. They know more about what they want, what they should have to pay for it, and what will be the value of it, than the generations that preceded them.

The college still retains the right to admit or not to admit an applicant, but it has much less control over the process at the top of the funnel. In the college admissions world before the advent of *US News*, students got the vast majority of their information about a given college directly from the college, augmented by the profile in Peterson's Guide perhaps, or the perceptions of a college guidance officer (rare, but it did happen), or the enthusiasm of friends or family members who might attended or otherwise develop an opinion about the college.

US News and other rankings books attempted to come to the aid of the college consumer by providing a source of "objective" data (or, as in the case of the Princeton Guide, decidedly *subjective* data) but in so doing, created what many understand are false hierarchies. Put another way, the guides and the rankings industry has created considerable heat, but little light.

Today students, however, have little need to rely on these guides (though of course they still have great influence.) Your future majors have enormous access not just to information about any college they want to look into, but to *insights* about them as well. They can, and will, come to understand how an International Studies major in your department differs from the same major at a different college.

The Internet today is not merely the vast information resource we first understood it to be—though it certainly *is* that. It is not merely an unending web of organizational websites pushing out information to people empowered by a search engine. The Web of today is a personal, interactive, "read-write-respond" world of inquiry and connection. It is a place of dialogue rather than monologue. It is a means by which your future students can come to understand what you do, what your enthusiastic about as a department and as individuals, why your college is the place they should be. And for you, it's a place where you can meet young men and women who, with your encouragement, will become the future of both the institution and the field of study in which you work. Out there, on line, right now, are your future majors, research associates, and scholars. And oh yes, they may also be your life-long friends. But only if they can find you, and you can find them.

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The Web can be an effective recruitment tool for your department only if your department makes its presence known, and only if it encourages conversation.

The college's website is critically important to the recruitment process, and without question the effect of a poor college website is many times more detrimental to the student recruitment process than is the effect of a beautiful new viewbook a positive one. But in the world of Web 2.0, the college website is no longer the ultimate authority, nor does it at any level constitute the entirety of the college's web presence.

The college website is still the first and foremost place a prospective student will go to find out about the institution. But there are countless other ways to find out what a given institution is really like. Today's Millennial Generation, the most marketed to generation in history, has a very finely tuned consumer sense—students know that a college Website is an orchestrated and managed presentation—a commercial if you will. Unless it is very revealing (read: unless it's a great commercial) it will not satisfy the student who is actively searching to understand your college. That student will use search engines, the blogosphere and the personalized send and receive of social networks to work around your website, and around your admissions process, to get the “real story.”

One of the ways we know this is happening is because of a rapidly developing phenomenon called the “stealth applicant.” Admissions offices are reporting that an increasing percentage of applicants are “unknown” to the college when their application appears—that is, they did not come through the funnel. They did their homework their own way—they used the Internet to do their research and arrive at their impressions (they haven't even collected that pile of admissions brochures that until recently was understood to accumulate in the corner of every serious college bound student's bedroom).

2. Approaching the subject thoughtfully

In thinking about how you might become more effective in attracting prospective and new students to the major, begin by considering these questions, some of which you may not have thought much about for quite a while. Not all of these questions may apply to your department at your college, and perhaps other questions would be even more relevant. The point, though, is to step away from the day to day long enough to consider your department as prospective students who do not yet know you well may consider it, and to identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

What is its place in the world?

In history?

In the business of the nation?

In the life of the college?

In contemporary culture?

How does your department's major relate to the mission of the college?

How does it advance the college's reputation? Is it fundamental to that reputation, or an enhancement of it?

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Is your department a foundational department, central to the educational opportunity your college promises to deliver, or is it an unusual department, with a curricular focus not easily found elsewhere, that brings something special and unusual to the curriculum of the college?
How does your department function relative to the overall academic program? Are you a department that needs to attract new majors, or are you oversubscribed as it is?
Does your department provide crucial core courses that students majoring in other subjects need to take in order to round out their educations?
If you are a foundational department, how do you deliver this foundation differently than the same department does at other colleges?
Why is majoring in your subject at your college a particularly inspired choice?

It's also important to take stock of how your department actually functions within the college, and in the broader academy:

What is the reputation of your department within the college, among your colleagues in other departments, among your current majors, within the student body generally?

What is the reputation of your individual department faculty? How is the feedback from students about faculty performance in the classroom, or their accessibility after class? Is your faculty predominately young or predominately more senior? Have you had considerable turn over in recent years?

Is it a cohesive department? Do your faculty members share similar sensibilities about the classroom experience, about how to interact with students, about teaching vs. research vs. publishing? Does your department have a strong, coherent identity, or does it not?

If your faculty is engaged in significant research, does this translate into great research opportunities for students, or is it perhaps the case that the research work available to students is not particularly exciting? How many "quoting experts" do you have in your department? Does your department have a specific reputation in its field that is known beyond the campus?

Is your department's major "hot" these days, or has it moved out of favor as a subject area among contemporary students? What is the "buzz" on campus about it? Is it considered an "easy" major or a "tough" major?

These, and others that may occur to you, are important ones you need to consider. You need to know this in order to understand better what your prospective majors will experience here once they get to campus, which in turn will help you to find ways, in reaching prospective students before they decide to enroll, to manage their expectations. For instance, if your major is considered extremely rigorous relative to other majors on campus, you need to determine how it should be presented to prospective students relative to other majors on campus.

Remember to pay attention to the stereotypes that exist for your major, and look for ways to turn them to your advantage. If you're the Chair of the Classics Department, for instance, and your

department is small, your majors have a different reputation on campus than those of your colleague who runs the gigantic English department. Your major is the road less travelled in this case. So maybe you can encourage a student toward the Classics by pointing out that “Classics majors are really smart and fun loving—so if you’re that kind of person—Classics is for you.” Or maybe you tap into the ethos of being a Classics Major, observing that it is rather like being an English major except that you explore many different languages and cultures. Or maybe you point out to the student who reveals a desire for it that because the Classics Department is small and intimate, and that therefore he or she will get a great deal of personal attention.

Build an image that the prospective major can relate to, and feel good about. Students pick their major because it fits the whole person they are, not just the resume they’re trying to build. As an example, aspiring law school applicants can get there via any number of majors, and arguably, the choice they make of an undergraduate major will have an effect on what kind of lawyers they become, or certainly how they approach the study of law when they get to law school. If a student expresses an interest in pre-law, and you’re the Classics Department Chair, consider this line of reasoning: “Classics majors develop discipline; flexibility of thinking, the ability to synthesize lost of information and organize it useful. And they develop an intellectual and creative edge.”

The Classics chair has an inspiring case to make to a student who wishes to go to law school, but its not wholly the same case that that same Chair might make to another student who has expressed an interest in a becoming a high school principal, or a college professor. In the facts of the major, of course, and in the intellectual value of the major, the arguments would be similar. But the conversations will be different for the simple reason that the persons involved in the conversations are different.

Your department is a microcosm of the institution of which it is a part. It maybe be big or small, technical or artistic, practically or theoretically based. For those who decide to make it their home, your department will dramatically shape their entire college experience. So be in touch with how it feels to be part of it, and how it interacts with the rest of the college.

3. Making a simple department marketing plan

This can be done on one page of paper.

First: Identify on paper (hopefully in one sentence) what your department’s long-term goal is (the goal that your marketing plan will be designed to help you achieve, but which may not be the only means by which you achieve it.)

Second: Write down the specific objectives you want to accomplish in the short-term (one academic) in order to progress towards your goal.

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Third: Write down the measurement criteria you will use to determine whether you have reached your objectives for the year, and whether having done so has effectively moved your department toward its long-term goal.

Fourth: Identify specific tactics you will implement in order to achieve your objectives, and a timeline in which they will be conducted.

Fifth: Specify a date when you will review your progress toward goal, analyze the results of your first year marketing plan, and develop a second year plan that builds upon those results.

4. Additional Suggestions

The best way to attract students to your major is to reveal to them how much the field has attracted *you*. Personify the fun of your discipline. Recognize how much your enthusiasm for the work you do moves and inspire your current students, and share that with your prospective students. And of course, encourage your department colleagues to share their enthusiasm too. Enthusiasm is infectious.

Be ready always to speak of the *benefits* of your discipline--how its study will contribute to the advancement of the student, personally or professionally. It's always better to start and conclude a conversation with a prospective student with by speaking of benefits rather than features, requirements and mandatories.

Be the "bard" of the department—be ready to tell prospective students stories that you and your colleagues are proud of—stories that reveal something about what the department is like, who the people are, what you do and why you do it and how, if they join you, they will be engaged. Develop and keep a list of stories of the college, your department, your faculty and your students, and, most important, your graduates.

Make it a discipline of your department to keep tabs on your graduates. Know what they're going now. Where they went upon graduation. How they did when they got there. How they benefitted from the major? Do you have a recent graduate now doing oceanographic research at Woods Hole? If so, that will almost certainly be of interest to a prospective student. So will stories of graduate schools attended, careers commenced and changed, and how the major has continued to serve your graduates in the years since college. Many liberal arts majors produce graduates who go on to do things not obviously related to the major. Clearly though, they benefitted in substantial ways from having been in your department.

If you haven't got a department newsletter, start one. If you have one in print, put it on line. If you haven't got yet started a department blog, do so, and solicit the participation of your colleagues, students and graduates.

Summary

It's important to remember that you can only get new students in your major if they have already been attracted to (and admitted by) the college. Your major, and the qualities of your program, could be the reason a student chooses your institution, of course, but for that to happen with any frequency, your commitment as department chair, and the commitment of your faculty to the recruitment process, must be deep and sustained. So it's important to be engaged, and stay engaged with the college's admissions office as much as you can, most especially at key moments in the recruitment cycle, to make sure that the counselors, representatives and tour guides who are the first points of contact between a prospective new student and the institution have a vivid and exciting understanding of your department fully and accurately in mind.

The admissions office has a hard job to do, and it can be a lonely one in a college in which academic heads are passive or disengaged in the student recruitment, or if they only engage begrudgingly. Let your admissions office know that they can rely on you and your colleagues to be there to help anytime to encourage a prospective applicant in the right direction. They will reward you with great students.

As a recent issue of *Inside Higher Ed* put it, "talking to kids about college is a retail, not wholesale business." It is time and labor intensive. It is accomplished one student at a time, one family at a time, one personal encounter at a time. And amid the ever escalating concerns about institutional competitiveness, affordability and outcomes, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that a college is a constantly changing, organic community of people, dependent on one another to sustain an environment in which each may pursue their personal goals. Your department is made complete by the students who determine to make it their academic home. So to ensure the vitality of your department, it's critical that you play an active and ongoing part in the process by which a student comes through that funnel and into your classrooms.