

# Use of Students As Recruiters

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## Introduction: Why Recruit?

Student recruitment by colleges of agriculture has taken on renewed emphasis because of: 1) declining enrollments in food and agricultural sciences degree programs and 2) the forecast of an impending shortage of highly qualified agricultural scientists, managers and technical professionals (Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences, 1984c).

Enrollments in agricultural curricula have declined significantly during the past decade. The consequences of this decline will eventually affect the availability of trained agriculturalists. The decline in enrollment can be attributed to two major factors: 1) a decline in the college-age population and 2) the failure of agriculture to compete with other professions in attracting students (Pescatore and Harter-Dennis).

Faced with declining enrollments and the projected need for human capital in agriculture, many colleges of agriculture have initiated aggressive student recruitment programs. The recent study of the Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences emphasized the need for increased resources being directed to student recruitment activities.

Increased emphasis is also being placed on attracting the academically outstanding student into food and agricultural sciences programs. However, attracting the outstanding student may require a shift in our approach to recruiting. Whereas in the past, career opportunities in agriculture have been emphasized, more attention to the professional nature of agricultural careers may be needed in order that prospective students can evaluate agriculture along with other professional disciplines. We have not done a particularly good job in projecting the correct image of careers in agriculture. Career image has a significant impact on a student's decision. Certainly, the image of careers in agriculture impacts our ability to recruit good students. High school students may be relatively unaware of the wide range of careers in agriculture. Many still associate careers in agriculture with farming — production agriculture. We need to emphasize that careers in areas such as biotechnology, computers, and business management all represent career paths in agriculture. Career image becomes even more crucial when considering the increasing number of students coming into agriculture with urban backgrounds. The academically outstanding student will likely consider several options before selecting a major. While career image is very difficult to deal with, it is basic to an effective recruiting program.

At last year's NACTA conference it was pointed

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out that if colleges of agriculture continue to provide the human capital needed and desired by agriculture and agricultural related industries, more emphasis must be given to recruiting the brightest and best students, as well as adjusting their programs of education (Hildreth).

The U.S. food and agriculture industry currently employs about one-fourth of the total work force. If colleges of agriculture are to continue serving such large segment of society with human capital development, attention needs to be given to all aspects of the student's educational experience — including recruitment.

## Students as Recruiters

As Colleges of Agriculture increase their recruiting activities, there is increased interest in the various recruiting techniques and their effectiveness. Evaluate studies, however, are few in number. As a result, the next best alternative is to look at factors that influence prospective students' decisions in selecting a college and a major. As a proxy, these studies can be helpful in developing a recruiting program.

A recent study to determine factors associated with students' decisions to attend the University of Idaho and enroll in the College of Agriculture found the following:

- The most influential factors associated with students' decisions to attend the University of Idaho were: 1) parent(s) and/or guardian(s), 2) university students, 3) campus visits, 4) friends, and 5) university literature (in order of importance)
- The most influential factors associated with students' decisions to enroll in the College of Agriculture were: 1) parent(s) and/or guardian(s), 2) university literature, 3) friends, 4) university students, 5) campus visits and 6) the vocational agriculture instructor.

In both decisions, a strong association with university student contacts was found.

This study suggests that university students can indeed make a significant contribution to college recruitment programs. Extensive use of students in on-going recruitment programs at the various colleges/universities would tend to verify that conclusion. Our own experience has been that college students can be very effective recruiters. This is primarily due to the fact that prospective students tend to identify quite easily with those of their own age group.

These represent the benefits accruing to the college from the use of student in recruiting programs. However, there is another aspect of participation which should not be overlooked, i.e. benefits accruing to

the student. Participation in recruiting provides an opportunity for: 1) practicing communications and public relation skills, 2) allowing the student to become more familiar with and become involved in the college, and 3) providing leadership training and practice. These are skills that are learned through practice.

### **Role of Students in Recruiting**

Having established the need for more aggressive recruiting by colleges of agriculture and that college students can be effective in recruiting programs, let me turn now to some examples of recruiting programs utilizing students.

#### **University of Kentucky Project 120**

In recent years, the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture has utilized college students in a variety of ways in recruiting. The most formalized approach to student participation has been "Project 120." The program, appropriately titled because of the 120 counties in the commonwealth, was initiated in the early 1970s. The program is a public relations program which allows students in the college to visit their home high school and to speak to students interested in careers in agriculture. Discussions center around job opportunities in agriculture, student life at the university and the academic and extracurricular programs offered by the College of Agriculture. The uniqueness of the program is its complete dependence on student input, both in planning and in implementing. The program is sponsored by the Agricultural Student Council and is coordinated through the office of the Associate Dean for Instruction.

### **Objectives**

1. Encourage enrollment in the College of Agriculture
2. Assist prospective students with enrollment, housing, and financial aid procedures
3. Inform prospective students about careers in agriculture

Although participating students may represent the various majors in the college, the program is designed to recruit students into the College of Agriculture, not into a discipline.

### **How the Program Works**

Planning and preparation for Project 120 start early in the fall semester. A fact sheet is compiled with specific information about the university, costs, housing, financial assistance, and Agricultural programs. Participating students are required to attend a training session in early December at which time the fact sheet is reviewed and other information is presented. This aspect of the program is coordinated by the Director of Student Relations in the Dean's office.

Immediately following the training session, letters are sent to high school teachers designated by students explaining the purpose of the program. The letter also indicates that one of their former students would like to

speak to students interested in a career in agriculture. A meeting time is suggested for sometime during the university's semester break. The emphasis is on reaching junior and sophomore high school students since by then seniors will have probably already reached a decision regarding college. The teachers are informed that the college student will contact them regarding final arrangements for the visit. Students are permitted to visit only their home high school and to contact a teacher that they know personally.

When students return home for the semester break, they finalize plans for the visit. The visit may involve either speaking to a class or to only a few interested students. Students are encouraged to keep their presentation informal and informative. Prospective students are asked to complete an information card indicating areas of interest, for use in follow-up from the Dean's office.

The student's participation in the program is completed when a report of each visit is made following their return to campus. The Director of Student Relations then follows up by providing additional information to the prospective student on their specific area of interest.

### **Evaluation**

Most of us would agree that based on: 1) declining enrollments in agricultural curricula of the past few years and 2) projected needs for trained agriculturalist in the years ahead, that colleges of agriculture cannot ignore the need for more aggressive recruiting programs.

Along with these aggressive recruiting programs is the need to recruit the brightest and best. This latter may require that more attention be given to projecting a more nearly correct image of careers in agriculture. Historically, this aspect has been and continues to be weak.

Only a few examples of programs utilizing the efforts of college students have been cited. The list certainly is not exhaustive. I'm sure that if each of you look at your own institution, you will find recruiting programs which involve college students. If you do not find such — you should! Students are an excellent, and sometimes untapped, resource.

### **References**

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