

Recruiting Is Not Enough: Retention Is Essential

Arnold Mokma, Linda S. Houston, and Allen Zimmerman

Abstract

In a time when enrollment is declining in colleges of agriculture, it is essential to creatively recruit students into colleges training individuals for growing careers in agriculture. Once students are recruited, however, retention is essential. Through the unique collaborative learning experience of an orientation class which incorporated writing into the curriculum, The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute is making progress in recruitment and retention.

Introduction

During the 1980's, institutions of higher education, particularly colleges of agriculture, had been concerned with enrollment declines. Because the number of high school graduates, those individuals whom colleges traditionally recruit, have steadily declined and because agriculture itself has suffered from a negative career image, colleges of agriculture have seen drastic reductions in enrollments. (See Table 1.)

Technical and community colleges, on the other hand, have increased enrollments because they have been able to attract not only current high school graduates interested in alternatives to four year colleges but also many of those individuals returning to college for retraining and re-entry into the work force. An increase in the number of women seeking preparation for entering the work force, job training programs needed to retrain individuals leaving obsolete industries, and the increase in minority populations throughout the United States have also contributed to an influx in enrollments at community colleges.

The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute (OSU/ATI) is in a unique situation in the struggle for recruitment and retention of students. It is a two-year technical college within The Ohio State University system, and therefore a member of the nation's technical, community and junior college ranks; consequently, OSU/ATI's enrollments should be bursting at the seams. On the other hand, OSU/ATI is a member of the nation's agricultural colleges, a group which has seen a steady decline of traditional students over the past ten years. Like other colleges of agriculture, OSU/ATI has experienced falling enrollments. (See Table 1).

The net result is that like other colleges of agriculture, OSU/ATI has had to re-examine its recruitment and retention efforts. How the Institute adjusted its recruitment activities and initiated one specific course, "Orientation", to improve retention, is the subject of this paper.

Mokma is an assistant director of Academic Affairs, Houston is coordinator of Communication Skills, and Zimmerman is chair of the Engineering Technologies, Ohio State University, Agricultural Technical Institute, 1328 Dover Road, Wooster, OH 44691

Recruitment

Because OSU/ATI enrollment declined by 23% in 1984, and because the demographics of the high school population indicates a decline in college entrance age students, the college changed recruiting techniques dramatically. Contacts with students in the less rural, more populated areas of Ohio were emphasized. A special brochure was developed to assist in this effort. An "Explore Day" was organized to encourage high school juniors and seniors to visit OSU/ATI and be introduced to career opportunities in non-traditional agricultural and related areas such as horticulture, food marketing, laboratory science, forest products, and engineering technology, as well as the traditional areas of production agriculture. *NACTA Journal* (2,4,7,8) had several excellent articles which provided ideas and suggestions on recruiting.

Efforts such as minority recruiting, workforce retraining/upgrading programs with businesses, day care opportunities, videos, and recruiting material selling "more jobs than graduates" became techniques used to let Ohio citizens know that OSU/ATI had much to offer in agriculturally related programs. These efforts have been successful and the Institute has experienced a 26% increase in enrollment. Now that increasing number of students were arriving on the OSU/ATI campus, retention became the next concern.

Retention

If a higher percentage of students were to complete curriculum requirements to earn the Associate of Applied Science degree and achieve success in career employment, a special effort at retention was essential. In particular, new student orientation activities and the first quarter orientation course were identified as keys to improve retention.

Table 1. Student Populations.

	HS Grads in US	US College of Ag Enrollments 4 Yr	OSU College of Ag Enrollments 2 yr	OSU/ATI Enrollments	
1981	2,730,193	91,984	6,529	1,516	754
1982	2,714,081	86,842	4,685	1,657	708
1983	2,608,992	80,217	4,730	1,489	740
1984	2,496,813	77,722	3,280	1,451	564
1985	2,422,714	74,885	3,237	1,508	569
1986	2,387,524	68,181	4,142	1,407	557
1987	2,424,455	64,423	4,521	1,351	540
1988	2,499,057	66,462	4,223	1,299	703
1989	2,473,566	66,894	4,051	1,258	707
1990	2,354,896				
1991	2,244,737				
1992	2,220,177				
1993	2,230,133				
1994	2,228,327				

A subcommittee of OSU/ATI's Academic Affairs Committee was appointed to review all orientation activities with an emphasis on retaining students. It was not sufficient to just recruit students; the emphasis had to be on "recruiting future graduates", which would reflect positively in enrollment growth built on retention.

The Committee which was composed of faculty and support staff from the counseling, student activities, health, safety, residence hall and admissions offices as well as the Learning Assistance program reviewed the literature and, in particular, other orientation models (3,5). It developed a retention-based program to emphasize the development process of helping students understand their new environment and their need to relate to it.

The new program begins when students come to the campus during the summer to take placement tests and register for classes. Next is a two-day orientation session prior to the first day of classes. The students then take the orientation course during their first quarter on campus. Although there are many other retention-based programs at the Institute which include tutoring, counseling, learning assistance, testing and accommodations, and minority program support, the course itself was to play a major role in helping all the students relate to campus life whether as traditional students attending OSU/ATI directly after high school or those returning for retraining.

Orientation Course

Orientation courses at many colleges offer the administration and faculty a unique challenge. Deciding how to present the needed material to students and help them adjust to campus life is no easy task. For many years the Orientation course at OSU/ATI helped students become familiar with the functioning of the college along with information regarding the industry of the student's future career. While much of the college related information could be communicated through a handbook, the industry information remained an essential need to the career oriented students; however, changes in the course had to be made if it was to be a more effective aid to student retention early in the individuals' college career.

The orientation course which had been required at ATI since the campus was founded in 1972, was viewed primarily as a technical offering. The course was offered by each technology with the technology coordinator as the instructor. The result was basically a different course for each technology with content and rigor determined by the instructor. Some coordinators used the course to prepare students for hands-on courses such as practicum and internship. Others treated it more like the introductory technical course for the program. In either case, the course was not primarily oriented to student retention at OSU/ATI.

During the first year of the modified program, the individual course remained under the direction of the technology coordinator, however, the new format allowed time for a series of elective forums. These included a variety of topics of which the students chose five. The forums dealt with topics such as notetaking, time management, roommate relationships, anxiety and stress. Each topic session was

offered several times throughout the quarter to encourage students to choose according to their needs.

Several problems occurred with this new format. In reality, although these were "elective" sessions, students were required to participate in five. Students delayed their participation until late in the quarter, so early sessions were poorly attended and sometimes cancelled. Later sessions were large and not conducive to group discussion thereby reducing the opportunity for students to develop strategies and skills necessary to bond with their new environment. Many took the sessions so late in the quarter that the value for retention was lost.

The older, non-traditional students found that some of the sessions were not appropriate for their needs. For example, older students had concerns about family/study time, day care problems, relating to younger students, and in general, low self esteem.

The following year the format was again revised to improve effectiveness of the retention based orientation course concept. This time students met twice a week in an actual class. For one of the weekly class sessions, students from the same technology or Division met with the respective technology coordinator or a member of their Division faculty and industry representatives. In these "technical" sessions traditional information about the industry and curriculum was addressed.

The second weekly session was conducted by a "facilitator," a member of the faculty or staff who was interested in working with students entering college. Each class group was composed of about 25 randomly assigned students representing a cross section of the student body. Because of the concern for older students, one section was not a random assignment but in fact an assignment based on age. This new organizational structure provided ample opportunity for group discussion and for students to learn the similarities and differences of the various technologies while at the same time allowing individuals to share concerns about issues facing all of them.

The syllabus for the course lists all the topics covered and shows some of the activities used to achieve the course goals. (See Appendix 1).

On occasion, as can be seen in the syllabus, instead of meeting in a classroom with a facilitator, there was a general session for all students to assemble and work through a critical topic such as learning styles, leadership, and human dignity.

The facilitators are a unique group of the faculty, administration, and support staff who volunteered to participate. Individuals committed to the program included the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs, the Assistant Director for Institutional Services, the Division Chairpersons, the Librarian, Chaplain for Interfaith Services, the manager of the residence hall, the counselors, and many faculty members. This composition speaks well of the commitment to a retention-based orientation program.

In order to retain a close similarity between these groups and to assist the facilitators in preparing for and conducting their sessions, a common "lesson plan" as indicated on the

syllabus was developed each week by the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs. Although there was a lesson plan, it was expected each facilitator would adapt/modify it to fit the group each session. For example, the facilitator of the non-traditional student section often made modifications to deal with topics of specific concern to the returning student. In addition to the lesson plans, several assignments were required of all students. Included was a journal based on the philosophy of Dr. Toby Fulwiler of the University of Vermont, Burlington, along with reaction paragraphs following each general session (6). There were also common exams. Finally, there were three facilitator meetings during the quarter to discuss common concerns that arose throughout the quarter.

Outcomes

At the end of the quarter, a course evaluation was administered to students and facilitators. Students felt that the topics were appropriate and that they had an opportunity to discuss their ideas with other students. The journals were excellent in those sections whose facilitators had previous experience with this technique. Students used the journal to express concerns, to work out problems, and to keep the facilitator abreast of their feelings about the course.

Several facilitators indicated professional growth in teaching "process" rather than "presenting information" which is a typical style in college classrooms. In effect, the concept of collaborative learning became a reality for many individuals who had not been aware of its merits.

As we prepare to enter the decades of the 90's, it is no longer appropriate for colleges of agriculture to recruit students. Colleges must recruit "future graduates," and this means not only going to non-traditional areas to attract students but also providing appropriate retention programs so they can make it through the entire curriculum. One important retention aid is a high quality orientation course required as a part of the curriculum requirements to earn the degree.

References

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3. Cohen, Robert D., Ruth Jody. *Freshman Seminar: A New Orientation*. Westover Press: Boulder, Colorado. 1978.
4. Elliot, W. Anson. "Faculty Involvement in Recruitment." *NACTA Journal* 31(3): 15-16
5. Ellis, David B. *Becoming a Master Student Course*. College Survival, Inc. 1986.
6. Fulwiler, Toby., Art Young. Ed. *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, IL. 1982.
7. Graham, Kenny. "Recruitment of Vocational Agriculture/ FFA Students." *NACTA Journal* 31(3): 8-11.
8. Larke, Alvin. "Recruitment of Minority Students: An Integrated Approach." *NACTA Journal* : 4-8.

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Appendix I

**Agricultural Science T202
Autumn 1990**

Course Organization

Title: Personal and Career Orientation

Credits: 2

Distribution of Class Time: 2 classes (Mon & Wed)

Course Description And Purpose

This course provides an opportunity for students to learn and adopt methods to promote their success in college and become a MASTER STUDENT. The course will explore personal and career interests, needs and goals and the support resources available to students. Everyone has untapped potential. Becoming a MASTER STUDENT is a lifelong process. The purpose of this class is not to prescribe a final destination. It suggests a direction for growth and learning.

This course will be based on cooperative learning. Students will work with one another, share ideas, discuss problems, and come to conclusions. The faculty member will be more a facilitator than a lecturer.

The professor will not lecture on material in the text. It is important that you read the assignments in order to participate in classroom activities and be prepared for exams and quizzes.

Course Objectives

At the completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Evaluate personal learning and study skills and have the skills to create a successful and satisfying college experience.
2. Understand the diversity by which people come to hold certain beliefs, attitudes and values and the impact those beliefs, attitudes, and values have upon human behavior.
3. List the variety of resources available at ATI.
4. Understand and use the skills necessary to be successful in their technology area and in industry.
5. Understand and describe methods to:
 - A. Set academic and personal goals
 - B. Develop and strengthen critical thinking skills
 - C. Increase and enhance communication skills
 - D. Understand the role motivation and leadership play in pursuing a college education

Text And Material

College is Only the Beginning
Journal Binder and Paper

Grades

Reaction Papers	10%	(2 at 5% each)	
Journal	20%		
Assignments	25%		
Interview	5%		90-100 A
Essay	5%		80-89 B
Schedules	5%		70-79 C
Study Skills	5%		60-69 D
GPA	5%		59- E
Quizzes	10%	(2 at 5% each)	
Midterm	5%		