



Program Recruitment

A CPTSC White Paper

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According to the Labor Department, the technical writing field is expected to grow 10 percent from 2010 to 2014, which is faster than average compared to other fields (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In 2024, it is estimated that the job market in our field will exceed 55,000. As professional, technical and scientific fields grow, so too will the need for writers and communicators in those fields. It is important to recruit undergraduates and graduates to degree programs in technical communication for this reason.

Of specific importance, our field also has need of and interest in recruiting more diverse students as industries diversify, globalize and tackle social justice policies and issues. Recent studies on racial and ethnic diversity in technical communication have found that recruitment and financial cost are among the top barriers for programs achieving diversity goals, and they encourage more assertive efforts to recruit underserved groups (Savage & Mattson, 2011; Jones, Savage & Yu, 2014).

We reviewed recent scholarly literature on program recruitment best practices and strategies. A list of reference is included for further reading. Four themes emerged from the literature:

- Prevalence and Efficacy of Recruitment Practices
- Research Studies of Strategies
- Student Perceptions of Recruitment Success
- Recruiting Dynamics and Problems
- Tactics for Encouraging Diversity in Recruiting

Only a very few studies specific to recruitment in technical communication exist. Therefore, the literature review includes research of efforts at university level and in other programs.

Prevalence and Efficacy of Recruitment Practices

The consulting firm Ruffalo Noel-Levitz has published the most information on the prevalence and effectiveness of several recruitment practices used by universities in general. While technical communication programs do often enlist these practices, the consulting firm did not survey our programs specifically.

Overall, offering financial aid and assistantships, campus visits and events, follow-up emails and phone calls, and search-engine optimized websites were most effective. Many commonly used strategies such as print ads, targeting adult learners, referrals and word of mouth from alumni and current students, and social media were not as effective as expected.

Common, effective practices included offering financial aid at the time of admission, offering scholarships and fellowships without work obligations; offering campus visits for admitted students; offering teaching and research assistantships; offering open houses to generate and encourage inquiries; and following up with emails and phone calls to students whose applications are incomplete, prospective students who

attend events, and students admitted with assistance; outreach to internal institutional undergraduate populations. The top ten most effective strategies and tactics for four-year public and private institutions included campus open house events; campus visit days for high school students; encouraging online applications through the Admissions office; weekend visits for high school students; encouraging prospective students to schedule campus visits thorough the Admission office; and campus visits for school counselors. Events and event-related activities were often among the top 10 most effective strategies and tactics across sectors.

Common ineffective practices included local television, radio and print ads; email lists of adult learners purchased from vendors; social media; word-of-mouth through international students visiting from home countries; mobile apps and QR codes; text messaging; referrals through institutional consortiums; on-the-spot admission events; oversees recruiters; alumni referral programs; viewbooks and other publications sent to inquirers; calls to overseas prospective students from current students and faculty; and bus, billboard and other outdoors advertising. Top 10 most effective strategies and tactics for two-year public institutions included encouraging online applications through the Admissions office; dual- and college-credit programs in collaboration with high schools; campus visit days for high school students; visits by admission reps to high schools; campus visits for school counselors; campus open houses; on-the-spot admission decisions during campus visits and open houses; TV ads; and off campus meetings and events for high school counselors.

Offering loans directly from the college or university made this year's list of the five least-used practices among respondents from four-year private and public institutions—but this practice received positive ratings from the majority of these respondents who were using it.

Findings from Academic Research Studies

Studies recommend that programs complete marketing plans (Winn et al., 2014). They emphasize using brand marketing strategies to create awareness, direct marketing to inspire response, and relationship management strategies to retain students (Sevier, 2004; Winn et al., 2014). Relationship marketing is also useful for sustaining and growing relationships with alumni. In both regards, research recommends replacing one-way relationship building such as fliers, emails and phone calls with mutual strategies such as events, workshops and rituals such as anniversary celebrations and alumni weekends (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Studies recommend that liberal arts colleges, in particular, generating unique, multi-pronged content such as testimonials, social media posts, web features and profiles to reach and engage students (Getty, 2015). They also support Noel Levitz findings that it is effective to offer research opportunities, engage with students personally, and establish contact between faculty and prospective students such as offering workshops, lectures, and meetings (Westrick et al., 2013). Faculty efforts, websites and networking at professional meetings were effective for recruiting students from other disciplines, institutions and countries.

However, studies on higher education recruitment strategies still lack some clarity about the most effective way to integrate several outreach channels and content messages (Winn et al., 2014; Getty, 2015). Furthermore, it is unclear the extent to which students use social media for college admissions

information. Some studies suggest it is used with negligible effect (Nyangau & Bado, 2012). Others say it has a greater impact than email, phone calls and traditional efforts, and that it does increase engagement, if not applications or acceptances of offers (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Hayes, Ruschman & Walker, 2009).

Recruitment Dynamics and Problems

Problems emerge in contemporary student recruitment because of the changing nature of funding and politics of higher education. More universities are adopting business models of education and regarding students as customers (Winn et al., 2015; Gunport, 2000). Competition from other programs and universities has increased, particularly in light of recent efforts in distance education to offer online and hybrid degrees (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). A lack of awareness of an industry and the job opportunities it provides can only compound difficulties recruiting students (Espy and Boys 2012). Elevating the profile of technical communication industry and research can help.

Student Perceptions of Recruiting

Studies have found that students have very practical concerns when considering applying and enrolling in an academic program. They value face-to-face interactions and emails over paper communication (Ohio State 2010; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012). Bersola et al. (2014) found that students selecting a doctoral program place importance on faculty, student, and community diversity and cost of living, but whether they enrolled depended on academic characteristics, such as their GRE scores. The lower the scores, the less likely they were to enroll. Dam (2014) found that, in addition to considering opportunities for assistantships and scholarships, members of professional organizations applying for Master's degrees consider more abstract features of the program such as its core philosophy, reputation, and faculty reputations. According to Lei and Chuang (2010), what students consider important to their decision to apply and enroll depends on student demographics such as age, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, marital status and citizenship. Similar demographic factors seem to bear upon the educational decisions international students (Ren, Hagedorn and McGill 2011).

Diversity in Recruiting

Technical communication programs have demonstrated interest and efforts in recruiting a more diverse student body. Our field has assembled diversity-related conference panels and made recommendations for funding diversity recruiting efforts beyond personal referrals by faculty and students (Jones, Savage and Yu, 2014). Studies suggest partnering with Hispanic-serving and minority-serving institutions such as historically black colleges, particularly mining traditional (i.e., English, communication, etc.) programs but also cultural studies programs (Savage & Matveeva, 2011). Studies also recommend developing formal networks to recruit students from underrepresented groups, offering scholarships, and building relationships with high school and community college students (Savage & Mattson, 2011). Unfortunately, inadequate financial resources and lack of commitment to recruitment efforts and policies are common obstacles.

One successful strategy includes having minority personally students and faculty follow-up with minority prospectives. Cuny and Aspray (2000) Eddie 2014 found tout factors influenced women to enroll in

technology-oriented programs: identifying potential mentors, being exposed to the industry and discipline pre-college, and learning the clear pathways to careers in the discipline. Also, Griffin and Muniz (2015) found it helpful to enlist university diversity officers, who leverage a wide range of strategies for diversifying prospective students, such as making campus visits, attending fairs, hosting summer programs for prospective students, organizing and inviting people to preview weekends, and networking with other programs across the country (Griffin & Muniz, 2015).

Recommendations

Based on findings from this literature review, several recommendations emerge:

- Use personal and face-to-face efforts such as emails, calls, campus visits and events where students and counselors meet faculty and admissions representatives, and use personal interaction with prospective students and faculty.
- Be sure your website is optimized for search engines.
- Make every effort to offer scholarships, fellowships and other means of financial assistance to grad students.
- Raise the profile of faculty achievements and tout the honors and accolades of the program online to demonstrate the quality and worth of the program.
- Create an evidence-based recruitment plan that sets forth strategic and integrated deployment of recruitment best practices.
- Create diversity-specific programs, mentorships and support to entice diverse student prospective students.

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