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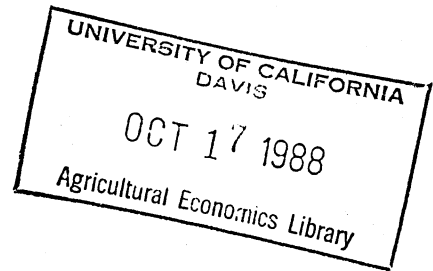
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DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDELINES AND APPLICATION
OF A STUDENT RECRUITMENT PLAN
FOR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS*

by

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDELINES AND APPLICATION OF A STUDENT RECRUITMENT PLAN FOR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Developing an effective recruitment plan for students in agricultural economics should include the following: Identifying appropriate individuals to aid in recruiting potential students; selecting an appropriate set of strategies or recruiting approaches; determining who is responsible for doing what and when; and evaluating effectiveness of the recruiting strategies.

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Introduction

Declining enrollments continue to be a serious concern for administrators and faculty in U.S. colleges of agriculture. Continuing declines can weaken resident instruction programs and have serious implications for enhancing college and departmental quality and stature. With decreasing federal support, and in some instances, state support, reduced enrollments can have serious budget implications. Oftentimes faculty and other resource reallocations (which are perhaps prompted by reduced financial support) are done on the basis of student numbers. In addition, fewer students enrolled in agriculture could likely cause a decline in the availability of trained agriculturists and perhaps faculty to properly train interested students. Hence, curbing enrollment declines is an important challenge for administrators and faculty in colleges of agriculture. Maintaining agricultural enrollment will be difficult in light of the declining student pool (especially those with agricultural backgrounds and interests) and the financial stress currently facing agriculture.

Interest in college of agriculture enrollments is evident from recent literature. One example is the Fall 1985 Enrollment Report, National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (1986). Another is an article by Schuster and Costantino (1986) which addresses the use of marketing research to develop student recruiting strategies which was motivated by declining enrollments. Welton (1986) has provided guidelines for a recruitment program in agricultural education.

The objective of this paper is to provide a student recruiting approach which might be useful to departments of agricultural economics for enhancing student enrollment. This is done by first offering some general guidelines

to be used in developing an effective recruiting plan--followed by a specific application of how a student recruitment plan was developed by the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Wyoming.

There likely is not a "best" recruitment plan, or one which would apply to all disciplines or even to the same disciplines in different universities. In fact, the recruitment plan presented in this paper is but one part of a recently developed strategic departmental plan which involves a series of performance goals including "increasing the size and efficiency of the undergraduate program." In the context of achieving specific objectives under this and other goals (e.g. increasing enrollment to some prescribed target level) it is necessary to initially identify specific activities to achieve each objective, as well as who is responsible for doing what, when and where. As a result, it is important to identify a functional approach to developing a specific plan. Because the recruiting message likely will be different at the university, college and departmental levels, the discussion in this paper focuses on the departmental level.

Essential Guidelines For
A Student Recruitment Plan

The following elements must be emphasized strongly in the recruiting process:

1) Develop an understanding of agriculture as a total industry, i.e. agriculture entails more than farm/ranch production. It includes the broad food/fiber industry as well as natural resource use and management issues, rural community development, etc.

2) An awareness of employment opportunities for graduates, or lack thereof, in which case, further graduate study may be necessary. In this context, it is worth noting that employment opportunities for college

graduates in the food and agricultural science (including agricultural economics and business) is projected to be strong through 1990 (Coulter, et al.).

3) An awareness of the curriculum options and how they contribute to training for employment opportunities.

4) Other pertinent information including the quality of the programs, faculty and course offerings which prepare students to be productive candidates for employment, as well as responsible citizens. The program offered by the unit or department must be of such quality as to provide students with opportunities, tools and knowledge for successful employment or additional education. There is a serious responsibility associated with recruiting students to a particular discipline.

In summary, the quality of the program and the opportunities afforded the student upon completing the program should be the emphasis of the recruiting effort. All of this presumes of course, that such programs are properly geared to prepare students for tomorrow's jobs and/or graduate training, and finally that job opportunities are adequate. Overall, the focus of a recruitment plan should be to provide prospective students with information upon which they can make their own career related educational decisions. "Hard sell" activities are not appropriate for a student's welfare and may be detrimental to a program over a longer period of time due to student discontent.

The actual development of a recruitment plan should involve the following:

1) Identifying targets or appropriate students for recruiting, or people appropriate to aid in recruiting potential students.

2) Given a particular set of recruiting targets, selecting an appropriate set of strategies or methods. A particular recruiting approach

that is appropriate and effective for one target group (e.g. high school students) may not be effective for another (e.g. community college students).

3) Determining who should be responsible for carrying out a particular recruiting assignment or strategy and when it should be done.

4) Developing a method and means to evaluate the effectiveness of the recruiting strategies on a continuing basis.

Various approaches might be considered to identify functional target groups. One possible source for this information is from surveys of current students. The survey instrument should be designed to determine who was influential in a student's decision to attend college and choice of major. It may also be useful to know the proportion of students who transferred into the program from junior colleges or other institutions of higher learning. Additional questions might be directed toward when decisions regarding choice of college and major were made by the student or potential recruit. In-depth informal discussion sessions (focus groups) with students might be used along with or in lieu of a survey.

In addition to surveying students majoring in agricultural economics, it might be necessary and useful to survey or interview students in other disciplines within the college or from other colleges. Responses from non-majors might provide information regarding any misperceptions and other lack of information regarding the major department or college.

It is only after the recruiting targets are identified via a survey or other relevant sources, that alternative recruiting strategies can be effectively developed. Strategies considered in this paper include those presently being used, as well as some additional methods which were identified by selected faculty and students, both within and outside the University of Wyoming Agricultural Economics Department. As described more fully in the following section, these strategies were in fact selected on the basis of

recruiting targets revealed in a student survey. The departmental undergraduate programs committee then suggested appropriate individuals and times to conduct each specific recruiting task. Evaluation and follow-up procedures will subsequently be determined and implemented by the Department Head in concert with the committee.

An Application

To determine the targets upon which the recruitment plan would focus, a survey of students enrolled during the fall semester 1986 in four undergraduate courses (two primarily freshman level courses and two junior-senior level courses) in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Wyoming was conducted. Selected results of the survey are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Individuals Responsible for Students' Decisions to Attend College, to Attend the University of Wyoming, and Choice of Major

<u>Individual</u>	<u>Attend College</u>		<u>Attend UW</u>		<u>Major</u>	
	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%^{1/}</u>
Parents	52	28	25	20	27	28
Grandparents	6	3	3	2	5	5
Brother/sister	30	16	16	13	7	7
Other relatives	9	5	8	6	3	3
Friend	21	11	19	15	9	9
H.S. counselor	20	11	6	5	0	0
H.S. teacher	23	12	4	3	0	0
UW representative	0	0	7	6	4	4
UW professor	0	0	3	2	5	5
A particular class	2	1	0	0	5	5
Other	<u>23</u>	12	<u>36</u>	28	<u>31</u>	32
TOTALS	186		127		96	

^{1/}Percent of total responses for that category rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Parents appear to be key individuals in a student's decision to attend college in general, as well as choosing UW and their specific major. Siblings and friends are also important sources of information for potential students regarding their educational decisions. "Other" shows up strong, particularly in the choice of UW and choice of major. "Other" is most often identified as "the student's own decision". Scholarships, athletics, good school, and in-state are additional points identified under "other" in the choice of UW. Job prospects appear under this category for the choice of major. It is noted that high school counselors and high school teachers were not instrumental in a student's choice of major.

The survey results are also important with regard to the message which needs to be communicated. For example, information to high school counselors and teachers perhaps should be broader and more general in nature as opposed to emphasizing specific course requirements for a particular degree. These individuals perhaps need to be better educated about what constitutes agriculture and the food and fiber system along with availability of employment opportunities in agriculture.

There is evidence that 2-year community colleges could be an important link in a department's recruiting efforts. For example, 30 of 66 respondents (45%) responded "yes" to the question, "Have you attended a 2-year community college?" Therefore, it seems worthwhile to expand recruiting efforts to include community college students and personnel, not only within a state itself, but in surrounding states as well. Students at this stage may often be more concerned about choice of major than their high school counterparts. Furthermore, closer working relationships with community colleges in curriculum planning is warranted to ensure easier transfer to the University and specific departments.

Several students responded that they did not decide on their major until the semester before coming to the University, or while they were attending a junior college. This result is consistent with that reported in a survey of 1985 Wyoming high school graduates who sent ACT scores to the University of Wyoming, but did not enroll at UW. Fifty-six percent of the one-hundred-sixty respondents indicated that they made the decision to attend college later than the fall of their senior year in high school. About 19 percent decided to attend college during the fall of their senior year. It is difficult to interpret the recruiting implications of these results. The delay by high school students in making the decision to attend college may suggest that they should be better informed about college in earlier grades. On the other hand, these results might indicate that high school students are not receptive to recruiting type material until they are about to, or after, they graduate. Visits with high school counselors, teachers and students might help resolve this issue.

The current and expanded recruiting efforts for the Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Wyoming, demonstrate the application of recruiting information provided by the survey of students and other sources. The target audience for recruiting materials, the recruiting strategies, who is responsible for carrying out the recruitment plan, and when it should be done are outlined in Table 2.

As noted in Table 2, existing recruiting efforts are aimed primarily at high school students who have expressed an interest in attending the University of Wyoming and high school principals. Consistent with the general recruitment plan and survey results, the expanded recruiting efforts include contacting community college personnel and students.

Table 2. A Summary of Existing and Expanded Recruiting Targets and Strategies, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Wyoming^{a/}

Target	Strategy	Who	When
<u>Existing</u>			
1. H.S. students (who have applied to UW)			
- Interested in business	Special letter and brochure ^{b/}	Dept. Head	April
- Interested in agriculture	"	"	"
- Outstanding students	"	"	"
2. H.S. principals (1,500) in surrounding states			
- Soc. sci. instructors	Personalized letter and brochure	Dept. Head	January
- Business instructors	"	"	"
- Vocational Ag. instructors	"	"	"
- Counselors	"	"	"
3. Parents/students	Display or video/ State Fair	Faculty	Summer
<u>Expanded</u>			
1. C.C. advisors/instructors	On-site conferences and meetings	Dept. Head and selected faculty	As appropriate
- Agriculture	- curric. awareness		
- Business	- employ. oppor.		
	- identify list of prospective students		
2. C.C. students	Letters/brochures	Dept. Head	Spring
3. H.S. students who have expressed an interest	Phone call from present student, preferably one who is from the same area of the state or county	Dept. Head and Ag Econ Club	Spring
4. H.S. and C.C. students who have visited with an advisor	A phone call before or after contact with student	Ag Econ student or advisor	As needed
5. Transfer students from other colleges	Welcome letter	Dept. Head	"
6. H.S. Vo-Ag students visiting campus	Ag Econ display and personal interaction	Selected students	"
7. Vo-Ag and business students	Invite their instructors to off-campus programs	Faculty	As appropriate

^{a/} The following abbreviations are used in the table: H.S. - High School; C.C. - Community College; Soc. Sci. - Social Science.

^{b/} Departmental brochure which outlines job opportunities, curriculum options, and associated course requirements.

In addition to the specified strategies shown above, there are other recruiting activities which are expected to continue on a more informal, ad hoc basis. For example, extension faculty have in the past relayed information regarding departmental programs to various people out in the state, at appropriate times and places.

While the specific targets and strategies identified above will not be appropriate for all agricultural economics departments at other universities, the approach to developing a recruitment plan should apply fairly broadly across disciplines and universities. In fact, the recruitment plan discussed above is purposely designed for department level recruiting, thus minimizing duplication of those activities more appropriate for college or university-wide efforts. The target audience and strategies will vary depending on the level at which recruiting efforts are conducted. For example, university level recruiting might want to emphasize pertinent aspects of college life and what students might expect when they move to a university campus.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of
Recruiting Efforts

The effectiveness of recruiting activities should be evaluated periodically, if not on a continuous basis. From a survey of departments participating in various recruiting activities, Pescatore and Harter-Dennis report that many units apparently engage in strategies that are perceived as ineffective, perhaps due to lack of knowledge. The worth of recruiting efforts may be assessed by various follow-up activities which could include the following:

- 1) Continuation of the survey of students in introductory classes to determine if selected recruiting strategies are having a positive impact.

2) Visits with selected high schools to assess whether what is being done is useful and what else could be done.

As noted above, sending letters and brochures to surrounding high schools for the benefit of relevant instructors and counselors is an important part of the existing recruiting effort for the UW Ag Econ Department (Table 2). Yet, it was also noted that high school teachers and counselors appear to have only a negligible effect (at best) on a student's choice of major in the context of the student survey (Table 1). This implies that although such a mass mailing approach is deemed worthy of a few experimental trials, its ultimate effectiveness and future worth must be scrutinized very closely with any of the above evaluation approaches. In addition, this approach will be evaluated internally with a specific question included in each of the 1,500 letters sent to high school principals, i.e. "Would you like to be placed on the departmental mailing list?" If very few positive responses are received, it might suggest (along with other relevant evidence) that the mass mailing approach is in fact not very effective.

In closing, it should be re-emphasized that effectiveness of departmental efforts is closely related to ongoing recruiting activities at the college and university level. If departmental efforts duplicate those of the college or university, they likely will not be very effective, regardless of how well they are conducted.

Summary

With enrollment declines in U.S. colleges of agriculture, there is a need for initiating and/or reviewing college and department student recruitment plans. The purpose of this paper is to outline an approach to developing a "departmental" recruitment plan which might be useful in enhancing student

enrollment, and to provide a case example which demonstrates the development and execution of a specific recruitment plan.

The primary focus of a recruitment plan should be to provide prospective students with information from which they can make "their own" informed decisions regarding their education and ensuing careers. With that in mind, developing an effective recruitment plan should include the following essential ingredients:

- 1) Identifying appropriate individuals to aid in recruiting potential students.
- 2) Selecting an appropriate set of strategies or recruiting approaches.
- 3) Determining who is responsible for doing what and when.
- 4) Evaluating effectiveness of the recruiting strategies.

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