

Student Ambassador Programs: Boosting Enrollment Through Peer Recruitment

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Abstract

This study gathered information about ambassador programs, including tour guide selection, training, duties, evaluation, and recognition from program directors at 40 public and private not-for-profit four-year colleges and universities. All institutions included in the study utilize student ambassadors; however, the importance placed on such programs in the literature has not been translated into practice. Nearly all program directors have major job responsibilities unrelated to the ambassador program and have little experience. The overwhelming majority of participants have not implemented ongoing training for tour guides. Finally, almost one-fourth of the institutions are not utilizing evaluation and assessment measures to collect important information about their programs.

The initial campus visit is like a first date. The tour guides are the suitors and the objects of the affection are the prospective freshmen. But this courtship has a twist—the guides' role is to represent not themselves, but the campus. Walking backwards as they often must, the guides woo visitors with a lively tour of the campus's finest facilities, while offering charming anecdotes about student life. In turn, the students decide whether to accept a second date. But unlike the proverbial dinner-and-a-movie date, this one could be the start of a four-year relationship. (Klein, 2004, p. 51)

Meeting the enrollment demands at colleges and universities is a challenge. The pool of potential college students has started to decline in most regions of the United States. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2004) predicted that the number of high school graduates will peak in 2008–09 at 3.2 million students. After that, in most parts of the United States, a slow but steady decline in the number of enrollments and graduates is forecast. As competition for students increases across the nation, many institutions are looking for innovative ways to attract students, such as weblogs, RSS feeds, podcasting, and instant messaging (Tower, 2006). The backbone of recruiting, however, is the

campus tour. Ninety percent of college-bound juniors and seniors plan to visit a campus prior to enrollment. For a major state-supported, four-year public university, that can mean more than 10,000 visitors annually.

Institutions frequently turn to current students, commonly called ambassadors, to provide a student perspective (Noel-Levitz, 2005; Washburn & Petroschius, 2004) when leading campus tours for prospective students and their families. Klein (2004) reported that 65% of students polled in a recent study said the campus visit had “the most impact on their enrollment decision” (p. 26). Furthermore, Sevier (2001) reported that “students quickly form their impression of an institution on the basis of the actions of the campus tour guide, who in some cases completely ‘turns them off’” (cited in Washburn et al., 2004, p. 36).

Using students in the college enrollment process is an “age-old topic” for admissions professionals (Symmonds, 2002). Staff members often look to the professional community for input about developing or improving student ambassador programs. The issue “is raised at nearly every college or university admission office at some point or another” (p. 7). The literature provides little scholarly direction for ambassador programs. Do campus visitors prefer tour guides who walk forward or backward? Is money an effective motivator for student ambassadors? What role should the ambassador program director play? These questions, and others, are unanswered by the current literature. This apparent “research hole” inspired this inquiry into ambassador programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the policies and practices guiding student ambassador programs at four-year American institutions. Two areas were emphasized: (a) program management and leadership and (b) ambassador development. The following research questions were addressed:

Program management and leadership

1. How are ambassador programs structured and managed?
2. What role does the program director play?