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Sherman Lundy
Burlington Community High School

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SCIENCE CAREER DAY: A RECRUITMENT STRATEGY FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

*Sherman Lundy
Science Department Chair
Burlington Community High School
421 Clearview Avenue
Burlington, Iowa 52601*

Many students do not picture themselves in science-related careers primarily because they are not informed about the opportunities available and the secondary and post-secondary education required for those jobs. To most students, people in science careers include physicians, nurses, scientists (whatever that means), engineers and possibly chemists. A few students are aware of additional career choices in geology and astronomy. The science careers most talked about are related to nature and wildlife, but students are not certain what is involved in these occupations. Vast numbers of jobs are, or soon will be, available in the fields of science and technology, and many of these jobs will lack trained personnel.

The faculty of Burlington High School feels a need to emphasize career opportunities in science and to encourage more students, especially females and minority students, to investigate these opportunities.

In considerations of gender, race and national origin, the science department's assessment of student recruitment, textbook selection and attitude is positive. The teachers make a concerted effort to help all students succeed. However, departmental energy should be channeled toward promoting science careers as well as citing other reasons for taking science courses.

In the late fall of 1988, the author organized a student committee to design a Science Career Day with two purposes: (1) to introduce all interested students to career opportunities available in the sciences and (2) to encourage more minority and female students to investigate and enter high school science courses with possible future careers in science. The student committee focused upon identification of occupations which appealed to students and promoted the idea that Career Day was for them, not staff.

Participation on the Career Day committee was voluntary; however, a 100-point extra credit incentive was offered. To receive the 100 points, a volunteer had to participate in Career Day activities from planning to completion. The student volunteers did an excellent job and, in reward for their efforts, received letters of commendation from the principal and were named "Students of the Month" by the science department.

To organize and plan Science Career Day, the ten committee members met after school twice a week for about a month. Dividing the responsibilities between program and ancillary services, they decided whom to invite and how the program would be conducted. One primary directive was to invite several female and/or minority professionals as presenters/company representatives in order to provide role models.

The program committee drafted an invitation to 30 businesses, manufacturers and professionals (including physicians, nurses and hospitals) in a 100-mile radius. The letter outlined the proposed program and requested presenters. The desire to have as many female and/or minority presenters as possible was expressed. A postal reply card was included with this letter.

In response to the invitation/informational letters mailed to potential presenters, replies were received from ten firms. Only eight respondents actually participated. A follow-up letter was mailed to those who did not answer the first time. Unfortunately, there was no further response.

The student committee decided on a series of five 45-minute presentations to give the audience a general overview of the presenters' careers. The students attending would rotate to the presenters. For each presenter, the committee developed a list of questions to help listeners understand the nature of the career and the training/education it required.

The student group responsible for ancillary services then began arrangements, including permission from the principal (who was very supportive), cafeteria luncheon passes for the speakers, refreshments for the guests, use of the library for the entire program, consultation with the other science teachers for help in publicizing and encouraging students to attend, publicity through the local news media and school publications, contacts with the audio-visual department for equipment and with the counselling department for assistance in student sign-up and scheduling with the various presenters.

On Science Career Day, some committee members were assigned to assist each presenter; others served as photographers, hosts, attendance monitors (two students took attendance for the central office) and facilitators for emergency tasks. Science department faculty used their planning periods to serve as supervisors, but essentially, the students took care of the operation.

Science Career Day proved to be a grand success. Over 300 students, most of whom formed the target audience, participated in the activities. The presenters -- Alcoa, J.I. Case, Burlington Medical Center, Des Moines County Naturalist, U.S. Soil Conservation Service, National Weather Service, a local physician and our school nurse -- enjoyed the day and indicated an interest in returning for a similar program in the future.

Upon conclusion of the activities, the student committee returned the library to its normal condition, and each student liaison wrote a thank-you note to his/her presenter. The principal also wrote thank-you letters to the presenters. A week after the event, the committee met to critique Science Career Day. Committee comments were generally positive with suggestions to add more presenters and to have a Science Career Day as an ongoing event, if not every year, every two years.

Efforts to encourage all students to take science courses will continue, but Burlington High School has explored a plan which may lead to other ideas for helping students to see science courses as the avenue to further education and career opportunities.