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Non-traditional students: Recruitment strategies and their effectiveness

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Non-traditional students: Recruitment strategies and their effectiveness

Abstract

In recent years, there has been considerable change in the student population in postsecondary education. At one time, a college campus consisted primarily of students who were 18 to 22 years of age. A decline in this population has been occurring for several years and is predicted to continue. "There will simply be fewer youngsters coming through grade school and high school in the 1990's. They have already been born" (Hruby, 1984, p.4). At the same time, the number of older, non-traditional students has been increasing on college campuses. According to Brodzinski (1980), the number of students who were at least 35 years old increased more than 66% between 1972 and 1978. Haponski (1983) noted that "(a)dults constituted 37.5% of the total college enrollment in 1978 and are expected to constitute 47% by 1990" (p. 1).

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS:
RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Denise M. Fasse
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Entitled: Non-Traditional Students: Recruitment Strategies
and Their Effectiveness

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Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

In recent years, there has been considerable change in the student population in postsecondary education. At one time, a college campus consisted primarily of students who were 18 to 22 years of age. A decline in this population has been occurring for several years and is predicted to continue. "There will simply be fewer youngsters coming through grade school and high school in the 1990's. They have already been born" (Hruby, 1984, p.4). At the same time, the number of older, non-traditional students has been increasing on college campuses. According to Brodzinski (1980), the number of students who were at least 35 years old increased more than 66% between 1972 and 1978. Haponski (1983) noted that "(a)dults constituted 37.5% of the total college enrollment in 1978 and are expected to constitute 47% by 1990" (p.1).

With these statistics in mind, the recruitment of non-traditional students should be a major consideration in the minds of college administrators. Aggressive recruiting of non-traditional college students could ameliorate the enrollment problems caused by declining numbers of traditional students in the later 1980's and the 1990's.

Statement of the Problem

It is important for colleges to become aware of the strategies involved in recruiting non-traditional students. Thus far, too little attention has been given to recruiting these students.

College students have reported the various avenues through which they have gained information about college in general and specific information about one particular institution. An ACT survey of 1982 freshmen revealed that the most common information sources included high school counselors, high school visits by college representatives, high school classmates, and high school teachers. None of these information sources is available to non-traditional students.

The central questions that underly this study are: (1) What strategies are being used to recruit non-traditional students? (2) To what extent are various recruitment strategies being used? (3) Which recruitment strategies appear to be most effective?

Importance of the Study

Because non-traditional students have only recently been considered a potentially significant segment of the student population, relatively little attention has been given to this aspect of student recruitment. To date, there have been limited efforts to evaluate the extent to which colleges across the U.S. are taking action to implement new recruiting programs for non-traditional students.

Not only will colleges benefit from an increase in the non-traditional student population, but adult learners constitute an important national

resource. In the words of Hruby (1984):

Adult access to further education and retraining has become imperative because we are simultaneously experiencing a rising average age of the American work force and accelerating change in actual employment requirements. Adult learners are a key to the future of the United States. The pursuit of learning by adults through their years of competence is no longer a luxury. It is essential to the public interest and requisite to the good life for all citizens (p.6).

Limitations of the Study

The eight institutions that were surveyed in this study were all from Midwest states contiguous to Iowa; all were public, four-year institutions of medium size in terms of total student enrollment. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results of this study to colleges and universities with different characteristics and/or from different areas of the United States.

Definition of Terms

Non-traditional students: Each of the eight institutions was requested to give its definition of the non-traditional student. The criteria provided by the institutions were: (1) off campus and/or weekend enrollees; (2) age, marital status, and employment status

especially part-time student status; (3) age 25 or older; (4) above usual age, part-time community person; (5) evening and part-time, non-degree seeking, (6) age 25 or older; (7) age, and (8) age 25 or older.

The definitions given indicate that age--specifically, age 25 or older--is the primary criterion in the definition of non-traditional student. Six of the eight universities listed age as one of several criteria, and four of the institutions used age as the sole criterion.

Marketing/Recruiting: Berner (1980) defined marketing/recruiting as "...the process of letting the prospective student know about the services available. The technique that involves identifying the potential student (customer) and informing him that the college has the class or program he needs (selling the product)" (p.57).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the literature reveals that some strategies used in the recruiting of non-traditional students include (1) welcome-back-seminars, (2) use of the media, and (3) use of community agencies/resources. These all represent ways of reaching non-traditional students which differ from strategies employed to recruit traditional students.

Welcome-Back-Seminars

Researchers have noted that non-traditional students typically experience more anxiety in approaching college than their younger counterparts. Haponski (1983), for example, stated: "Adults exhibit a high level of anxiety over their ability to compete at college; they are concerned about how to pay for college; and they wonder how they are going to be able to balance work, family, and college demands" (p.2). One approach to alleviating some of the fears and anxieties of non-traditional students is the back-to-school orientation program which provides prospective students with the information which allows them to feel more comfortable about attending college. A back-to-school orientation may give them the needed reassurance that they have the potential to compete successfully. The criteria of a good back-to-school program include the following (Haponski, 1983):

- 1) High visibility in the community;
- 2) Attractiveness for a sufficient number of participants;

- 3) Provision of detailed and accurate information, assurance and assistance in overcoming obstacles;
- 4) Inspiration for students to act.

A back-to-school orientation serves the broader interest of the community and advances the institution beyond its traditional posture. The orientation program lets the people know that the college intends to serve them whether or not they decide to enroll; such a program helps boost the college's reputation. The program brings the people to campus, and there they will begin to feel at home in the institution.

Haponski (1983) noted that "(i)mplementation of an orientation program may be as simple as a one-evening seminar followed by a social hour, extensive as a full-term credit course or something in between" (p.8). Regardless of format and length, program content must be solid. Adult learners themselves may be significantly involved as paraprofessional participants. "Peer counseling groups are popular, and successful at many institutions. The cost of your program will be recovered in tuition income" (Haponski, 1973, p.8). As Bauer (1981) noted, "(o)rientation programs could include introduction to members of the adult student organization" (p.236). Members of the non-traditional student organization could assume peer counselor roles, and be a support group for the incoming non-traditional students. These students are knowledgeable about the institution and have succeeded within it. Therefore, they are in a good position to help non-traditional students

who are matriculating.

An exemplary back-to-school seminar exists at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. The sessions last about one hour each; they include audio-visual materials as well as oral presentation in an informal, supportive environment. Again, the recurring theme of anxiety is addressed. "They feel less threatened by coming into this type of session than walking into an admissions office because the session allowed them to make an intermediate, anonymous step toward school and, as some told us later, this was the push they needed" (Hartnagel & Union, 1981, p.12). There are tangible rewards for the institution, because 75% of those who attended the sessions actually were interested in attending college.

Use of the Media

Once student needs have been determined and programs have been developed to meet those needs, it is necessary to let the prospective students know about the programs. Some methods used to recruit traditional students have proven to be ineffective in recruiting non-traditional students. Different strategies must be used. Berner (1980) emphasized the importance of the media.

Getting information to the largest possible number of prospective students for the least possible cost is the greatest challenge of marketing...The recruiter can try to work through existing communication systems, making them more

effective for his particular purposes. Perhaps the single most important principle to remember in marketing is to keep the program highly visible to the target population. A well planned program includes a weekly or monthly time table. Each month, some publicity should be generated (pp. 60-61).

Berner (1980) included newspaper announcements, advertisements, radio, and television in his discussion of the media. He emphasized the importance of newspapers.

Newspaper announcements have been effective in reaching large numbers of adults. Newspapers want to publish news, so the recruiting team should emphasize any public service aspect or unusual element of the program in preparing press releases. Family section editors may be invited to interview adults who have returned to school or faculty members who teach courses of interest (p.61).

Other media may also be utilized to good advantage. Sometimes radio and television announcements can be secured free of charge, because stations are required by the Federal Trade Communications Commission to provide public service announcements and programming.

Use of Community Agencies/Resources

There are other strategies to make the programs and institutions more visible to prospective students. As Berner (1980) indicated, a college would be wise to work with the community in which it is located.

Announcements of college programs for adults may be sent to directors of personnel or training in neighborhood agencies and business organizations. If they print in-house bulletins or newsletters, they may be willing to include information about college programs for adults, especially if these serve to upgrade their employees (p.60).

This strategy is also urged by Redburn & Buss (1978) who advocated a direct survey of the businesses and organizations in the college's market area. Such a survey would include a brief written questionnaire to elicit the educational needs and goals of the business or organization. The questionnaire could also elicit information concerning barriers which prevent community members from enrolling in college courses. Local employers and community leaders can also provide a link between the potential students and the institution. Other resources within the community that could be tapped include libraries, community centers, employment agencies, chambers of commerce, churches, service organizations, etc.

Another innovative idea to help non-traditional students become informed about a college is a call-in telephone answering system. It is essentially a "hotline" which a person may utilize to get the

information he/she wants. Such a service, Compact for Lifelong Education Opportunities (CLEO), exists in Delaware Valley. It is an information center as well as a telephone hotline. CLEO provides information about the several participating colleges, and it also offers counseling for those who want extra help in making decisions about college. The director of CLEO described the success of the program:

Moreover just as the level of cooperation, of sharing, has grown, the level of our public visibility has grown, so that we have become for significant numbers of adults in the region the first step on their way back to school, a place to which they come for information, encouragement, discussion of programmatic alternatives, academic and career counseling (Journal of Career Education, 1983, p.269).

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The sample and the survey instrument for this study are described below.

The Sample

The institutions asked to participate in this study were universities with characteristics similar to the University of Northern Iowa. Eight universities were surveyed. All were medium-size ranging from approximately 8,500 to 15,000; four-year public universities located in Midwest states contiguous to Iowa.

The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument (Appendix 2) used in this study was designed to (1) ascertain what recruiting techniques have been implemented to recruit non-traditional students and to (2) assess the effectiveness of the various recruitment strategies. The survey instrument contained a list of 22 non-traditional recruiting techniques. For each technique, respondents indicated if it was "never considered", "considered but rejected", "under consideration", or "already implemented." For each technique already implemented, a Likert-type scale was used by respondents to rate its effectiveness. The scale ranged from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (very effective). In addition, respondents were requested to list any strategies already implemented at their institution

but not included among the 22 listed. Finally, respondents were invited to offer general comments about strategies that were particularly effective or ineffective.

The survey instrument was mailed to the Director of Admissions at each university. Several procedures were taken to ensure a maximum number of responses:

- 1) A cover letter (Appendix 1) was included with each survey.
- 2) The cover letter emphasized the importance of the survey and the need to have each university's response.
- 3) A preferred response date was included.

The rate of response was 100%. All eight universities completed and returned the survey instrument.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Results of the survey are reported in Table 1. The median number of strategies implemented was 12.5 out of 22. The range was from only four strategies implemented at one university to as many as 17 strategies implemented at two universities. The strategies that were implemented by at least six institutions, with effectiveness ratings in parentheses, included the following:

- 1) Advertise through newspapers (4.10)
- 2) Place literature at community libraries (3.60)
- 3) News releases to local radio, T.V., and newspapers (3.57)
- 4) Have college representatives speak at clubs/organizations (2.83)
- 5) Contact prospective students through local business/industry (3.71)
- 6) Mailings to former part-time students (3.43)
- 7) Mailings to your university's employees (3.29)
- 8) Public service announcements through radio/television (2.83)

Strategies that were rated 3.5 or higher in terms of effectiveness were:

- 1) Advertise through newspapers (4.10)
- 2) Distribute a back-to-school guide aimed at non-traditional students (4.0)

- 3) Advertise through T.V. (3.75)
- 4) Contact prospective students through local business/industry (3.71)
- 5) Place literature at community libraries (3.60)
- 6) News releases to local radio, T.V., and newspapers (3.57)

When respondents were requested to list recruitment strategies already implemented at their university, but not included in the survey list of 22, the following strategies were cited:

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Effectiveness Rating</u>
1) Adult education fairs.....	5.0
2) Schedules and letters to public schools.....	5.0
3) Production and distribution of public service guides to area businesses, agencies, health institutions, and real estate agencies.....	Too new to rate effectiveness
4) Workshops for counselors and personnel officers who refer adult student clientele to the University..	Too new to rate effectiveness
5) Career development seminars open to the general	

- community; offered every semester, including summer.....5.0
- 6) Advertisement in Chamber of Commerce Newsletter.....5.0
- 7) Day-long career/life planning workshops at area two-year (community college and technical schools) campuses for adult students.....Too new to rate effectiveness
- 8) Circuit of personal visits to personnel officers.....5.0
- 9) Open house days.....4.0
- 10) Telethon.....3.0

Some of the overall comments made about particularly effective strategies include the following:

- 1) "currently evaluating efforts and considering increasing recruitment"
- 2) "workshops, advertisements in local shopper, library exposure, word-of-mouth, phone-in registration, central one-stop shopping place"
- 3) "tapping newspapers in small communities around the college"

4) "contacts with area businesses and agencies"

TABLE I
UTILIZATION OF RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES
BY THE
EIGHT UNIVERSITIES SURVEYED

* * * * *

Strategy	Never Considered	Considered But Rejected	Under Consideration	Already Implemented (Number)	Already Implemented (Percentage)	Average Effectiveness Rating
						1 = Low--Very Ineffective 5 = High--Very Effective
1) Contact community men's club/organizations	2	2	0	4	50%	3.25
2) Contact community women's clubs/organizations	2	2	0	4	50%	3.25
3) Contact YMCA/YWCA	4	2	1	1	12.5%	3.00
4) Advertise through radio	0	2	1	5	62.5%	2.60
5) Advertise through television	1	2	1	4	50%	3.75
6) Advertise through magazines	3	3	1	1	12.5%	2.00
7) Advertise through newspapers	0	2	0	6	75%	4.10
8) Place literature at community libraries	1	0	1	6	75%	3.60
9) News releases to local radio, T.V., & newspapers	0	1	0	7	87.5%	3.57
10) Have college representatives speak at clubs/organizations	0	1	1	6	75%	2.83
11) Display materials in high traffic areas (Example: shopping malls)	0	1	2	5	62.5%	2.80

TABLE I
 UTILIZATION OF RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES
 BY THE
 EIGHT UNIVERSITIES SURVEYED

* * * * *

Strategy	Never Considered	Considered But Rejected	Under Consideration	Already Implemented (Number)	Already Implemented (Percentage)	Average Effectiveness Rating 1 = Low--Very Ineffective 5 = High--Very Effective
12) Contact prospective students through local business/industry	1	0	0	7	87.5%	3.71
13) Billboard advertising	6	1	1	0	0.0%	-0-
14) Send literature to local business/industry	0	0	1	7	87.5%	2.86
15) Distribute a back-to-school guide aimed at non-traditional students	2	0	1	5	62.5%	4.00
16) Mailings to former part-time students	1	0	0	7	87.5%	3.43
17) Mailings to churches	4	0	0	4	50.0%	2.25
18) Mailings to your University's employees	0	0	1	7	87.5%	3.29
19) Inserts in bank statements	6	1	1	0	0.0%	-0-
20) Home visitations with prospective non-traditional students	7	0	1	0	0.0%	-0-
21) Public Service announcements through radio/television	0	1	0	7	87.5%	2.83

TABLE I
 UTILIZATION OF RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES
 BY THE
 EIGHT UNIVERSITIES SURVEYED

Strategy	Never Considered	Considered But Rejected	Under Consideration	Already Implemented	Already Implemented (Number)	Average Effectiveness Rating 1 = Low--Very Ineffective 5 = High--Very Effective
22) Provide literature for distribution to local Welcome Wagon	4	0	2	2	25%	2.50

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There has been limited investigation of the various aspects of non-traditional student recruitment. This study has provided information helpful to universities in the selection of strategies for recruiting non-traditional students. It is recommended that universities take a close look at the following strategies, because they are the strategies that were rated high in terms of effectiveness: 1) advertise through local newspapers; 2) place literature at community libraries; 3) news releases to local radio, T.V., and newspapers; 4) contact prospective students through local business/industry; 5) distribute a back-to-school guide aimed at non-traditional students; 6) advertise through T.V. Some other recruitment strategies, not as highly rated as the preceding but still deemed "effective," were: 1) contact community clubs/organizations, 2) contact YMCA/YWCA, 3) mailings to former part-time students, and 4) mailings to university employees.

One surprising finding was that the survey instrument was completed by not only admissions directors but also by such staff members as a director of women's center, coordinator of adult opportunity, or associate dean of continuing education. Historically, continuing education programs have dealt with evening and weekend courses, correspondence courses, and courses offered through the college at off-campus locations. The students who enroll for courses that are coordinated by the continuing education office are most often non-traditional; therefore,

it would seem especially beneficial for that office to be actively involved in the recruitment of non-traditional students for the entire university.

Obviously, some universities have already implemented several measures to recruit non-traditional students. Because there is a predicted decline in the population of traditional aged students, there could and should be a continuation of the current trend to place an emphasis on non-traditional student recruitment.

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APPENDIX I

Denise Fasse
501 Schneider
RR 1
Denver, IA 50622
Business Phone: 273-2700

Edward Pierce, Director of Admissions
SOUTHWEST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY
901 South National
Springfield, MO 65804

Dear Mr. Pierce:

I am a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa and a candidate for the M.A.E. Degree in College Student Personnel Services. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters Degree, I am researching the strategies used to recruit non-traditional students. It is the purpose of this study to identify those strategies which are, in fact, used and to ascertain the effectiveness of various strategies.

All of the universities requested to provide information about their efforts to recruit non-traditional students have certain characteristics in common. All are four-year public universities, medium-size in terms of student enrollment, and all are located in states contiguous to Iowa.

Inasmuch, as only eight institutions are being surveyed, your participation is critically important. It should take no more than a half hour--at the most--to respond to the enclosed survey instrument. Please return the completed questionnaire to me in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided by December 20, 1985.

I will share the results of this with everyone who participated. Along with the recruitment survey, please enclose any recruitment literature for non-traditional students that you have. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and assistance.

Sincerely,

Denise Fasse

/bjh

Enclosure

APPENDIX II

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES FOR
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

PART I. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Name of Respondent _____

Position _____

Institution _____

Telephone Number _____

Total Undergraduate Enrollment _____

Head Count Enrollment (as accurate as possible) of Undergraduate
Non-Traditional Students _____

How does your University define "non-traditional" ? (e.g., age, marital status,
employment status, etc. _____

PART II. RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Following each strategy are these three options: "Not Being Considered," "Under Consideration," and "Already Implemented." If the strategy has not been considered at your University or is currently under consideration but not yet implemented, place an "X" in the appropriate space. If the strategy has been implemented at your University, circle the number that best represents its effectiveness.

Strategy	Status							
	Never Considered	Considered But Rejected	Under Consideration	Already Implemented				
				Very Ineffective	Effective	Very Effective		
			1	2	3	4	5	
Contact community men's clubs/organizations				1	2	3	4	5
Contact community women's clubs/organizations				1	2	3	4	5
Contact YMCA/YWCA				1	2	3	4	5
Advertise through radio				1	2	3	4	5
Advertise through television				1	2	3	4	5
Advertise through magazines				1	2	3	4	5
Advertise through newspapers				1	2	3	4	5
Place literature at community libraries				1	2	3	4	5
News releases to local radio, T.V., & newspaper				1	2	3	4	5

** PLEASE INDICATE BELOW ANY COMMENTS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT THE STRATEGIES THAT YOU FELT WERE PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE OR INEFFECTIVE. **