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Undergraduate Recruitment Strategies at Penn State's School of Forest Resources

Betty Harper¹

ABSTRACT : Enrollment declines in natural resources programs across the nation since the mid-nineties have raised concerns about the future of natural resources education. Since its peak in 1998, enrollment in Penn State's School of Forest Resources has dropped from a record high of 535 to 315 in fall 2003. At the same time state and federal agencies seeking to maintain and diversify their workforce are facing unprecedented rates of retirement. To address this issue, the School of Forest Resources is continually evaluating its recruitment and retention efforts. Gone are the days of waiting for students to come to us. Current recruitment and retention strategies include: 1) marketing to the large pool of existing undecided Penn State students, 2) marketing to Penn State advisors in other programs and at other Penn State locations, 3) recruiting at other "feeder" institutions, 4) summer natural resources experience programs, 5) increased personal contact with potential students, 6) peer-to-peer recruiting, 7) increased scholarship funds, and 8) retooled marketing materials and web presence. These strategies are under constant evaluation and unsuccessful efforts discarded so that new tactics may be tested. While we wait to discover the ultimate effectiveness of these new strategies, their very nature reflects an important and fundamental change in attitude toward student recruitment and retention at Penn State's School of Forest Resources.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, undergraduate enrollment in Penn State's School of Forest Resources (SFR) was at an all-time high. With a total of 560 students across the Forest Science, Wildlife and Fisheries Science, and Wood Products majors the only enrollment concern was being able to offer enough lab sections to keep all of our students on track for graduation. In the five years since, enrollment in the SFR has suffered an alarming and sudden downward trend. In fall 2003, only 315 students appeared on our rosters. At the same time the SFR began to examine its recruitment strategies, information began to come in from other universities facing similar declines. Data collected by Terry Sharik and Kathy Earley in 2003 indicated that total enrollment in forestry and natural resources related programs at universities nationwide has declined by approximately 33% since 1995.

While student interest in natural resources professions appears to be decreasing, the demand for professionals is on the rise. In 2000, the U.S. Forest Service released its 2001-2005 Workforce Plan. The plan outlined an anticipated loss of 30% of the Forest

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Service workforce by 2005. The greatest numbers of external hires are projected to be Forestry Technicians, Foresters, and Wildlife Biologists. The fastest growing positions are Botany, Fisheries Biologist, and Soils Scientist. Underlying the Forest Service's needs for new hires is a strategic emphasis on increasing the diversity of their workforce. In 2002, the Forest Service increasing its permanent workforce hiring by 8.6% (U.S. Forest Service, 2002) and almost half of these hires were in entry-level positions. Most recent estimates indicate that they will be hiring 7000 more people over the next five years. The Forest Service is not alone in this predicament, other federal natural resource agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Park Service face a similar hiring situation. Where will these new employees come from, if not from natural resource programs?

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Five years ago the SFR and many university natural resource programs had the luxury of waiting for good students to come to us. Today we must actively seek to recruit a diverse student body from a pool of candidates increasingly drawn to careers in business, healthcare, and law enforcement. The SFR has developed a seven-tiered recruitment strategy aimed at not only increasing the number of students in its classrooms, but also quality and diversity. This strategy includes: 1) attracting undecided students, 2) recruiting from two-year programs, 3) offering summer programs for high school students and teachers, 4) increased personal contact between SFR faculty/staff and potential students, 5) peer-to-peer recruiting, 6) increased freshmen scholarships, and 7) marketing.

Strategy I - Undecided Students

In spring 2004, Penn State University had 6000 students officially listed in the Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS), the enrollment program for students exploring major options. In addition there were 2500 students in the College of Business and 3600 students in the College of Engineering who were not yet formally accepted to a major. Many of those potential Business and Engineering students will not be accepted into those high demand colleges due to strict enrollment controls. In addition to the 35,000 undergraduate students enrolled at Penn State University Park, an additional 30,000 are enrolled at 23 other Penn State locations that do not have advisors or programs in forestry, wildlife, fisheries, or wood products. The most efficient use of resources dictates that the SFR target these students who are already at Penn State. To do this, the SFR maintains contacts with advisors in DUS, Business, and Engineering and provides them with specialized program materials to share with students. For example, the SFR has developed Wood Products major fact sheets that show a first or second-year Business or Engineering student how their existing courses can be used in the Wood Products program and how this major addresses their interests and career goals. In addition, the SFR is developing a direct mail strategy targeting students that have recently learned they were not accepted to their first-choice major.

Strategy II – Technical Programs

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania there are three two-year technology programs that have historically sent small numbers of students to Penn State University Park to complete their baccalaureate degrees. Two of these are Penn State programs: the Wildlife Technology program at Penn State DuBois and the Forest Technology program at Penn State Mont Alto. The third is the Forest Technology program at the Pennsylvania College of Technology. Over the past four years the SFR has cultivated its ties with these programs. The SFR undergraduate program coordinator makes frequent visits to these campuses and works closely with students considering the transition. Curriculum coordination has increased to facilitate the acceptance of credits from the two-year programs into the SFR. The results of this effort have been impressive. In the first half of the 1990's only a very small number of students from these technician programs were matriculating into the SFR, but over the last few years almost 50% have made the transition.

Strategy III – Summer Programs

Faculty and staff in the SFR have developed or participate in a number of summer programs aimed at bringing high school students and their teachers to campus and introducing them to the SFR. These programs include the Conservation Leadership School (CLS), Food and Agricultural Sciences Institute for Academically Talented High School Minority Students (FASI), the Pennsylvania Governor's School for Agricultural Sciences (PGSAS), and the Forest Resources and the Aquatic and Fisheries Science Institutes for Teachers (FRIT and AFSIT). CLS gives high school students the opportunity to spend two weeks living and learning in Penn State's Stone Valley Experimental Forest. A number of our faculty and staff work with students during this program to cultivate their interests in the environment. The FASI program is a one-week living-learning program that introduces minority students to programs and careers in natural resources and agriculture. The PGSAS brings some of the best students in the state to spend five weeks on campus in an intensive agricultural and natural resources educational program. In addition to these student oriented programs, the FRIT and AFSIT programs are organized by SFR faculty to provide teachers with the tools to develop hands-on environmental curricula for their classrooms.

Strategy IV – Personal Contact

Prior to 1999 SFR material was distributed on request but no additional contact was made with potential students. In 1999 the SFR developed a database to track all such contacts and ensure that a organized series of follow-up contacts was made. Two weeks after receiving an information packet, potential students receive a second letter inviting them to visit campus and providing instructions for organizing such a visit. Visits are organized to include meetings with representatives of multiple majors if necessary, as well as the traditional campus tours, admissions and student aid counseling. Whenever possible, potential students and their families meet with the undergraduate program coordinator, the undergraduate programs staff assistant, and at least one additional faculty member in

their major of interest. When students do matriculate into SFR programs it is possible to trace back to our initial point of contact with them and determine our most effective strategies. Likewise when students do not matriculate it is possible to query the database to discover any common points at which we are losing students.

Strategy V – Peer-to-Peer Recruiting

The voices of peers can be some of the most influential in the college and major choice process. Recognizing this, the SFR attempts to connect current and potential students. Potential students visiting campus are escorted by Penn State students. Likewise, those students that have been offered admission to the SFR are telephoned by current Penn State students. Whenever possible the current student is an SFR student. If that is not possible, the student is a member of the College of Agricultural Sciences, of which the SFR is one unit. In addition to these personal contacts, the SFR-affiliated student societies, including student chapters of the Society of American Foresters, The Wildlife Society, and the Forest Products Society, send congratulatory letters to students who have been offered admission.

Strategy VI – Scholarships

Traditionally the SFR has been conservative in its scholarship offers to first-years students because of the risk that students will change major. However, recently the Scholarship Committee has begun to take a more proactive approach to recruitment. In 2003-04, the SFR offered four new scholarships to outstanding incoming first-year students. These scholarships were for \$5000/year for up to four years. Every student being considered for this scholarship had a phone interview with the SFR undergraduate program coordinator to determine their level of interest and commitment to the program. To help ensure retention of these students, the requirements to maintain this scholarship from year to year include regular meetings with an academic advisor and active participation in at least one SFR student organization.

Strategy VII – Marketing

As a final but critical tool in the SFR recruitment strategy, all marketing materials have been, or are in the process of being revised. In 2003 the SFR web page was completely redesigned to be more user-friendly and provide information to potential students and their families. In addition, one page fact sheets were developed to illustrate post-college career options for each SFR major. Currently, new brochures featuring dynamic photography and bulleted highlights rather than extensive text are in development. These focus on our field and hands-on educational experiences and the use of advanced technology and will feature a diverse and representative group of students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By and large the recruitment efforts instigated by the SFR are in their early stages and the results are not yet clear. However, there are some positive signs. In 2003-04 offers of admission to students indicating a major in the SFR were up 47%. As previously indicated, the number of students moving from Penn State's two natural resources technical programs into the SFR has grown from an insignificant number to almost 50% of their graduates, or approximately 20 students a year. As many as 20 additional students per year may be coming from the Pennsylvania College of Technology's Forest Technology program. The SFR recruitment database has also given us new information to help direct our efforts. The vast majority of potential students continue to be referred to the SFR through our College recruitment effort; however a growing number are discovering us through our web presence.

Recruitment strategies in the SFR are an ongoing and constantly evolving process. When recruitment first began to receive priority our efforts were widespread and unfocused. Many strategies and efforts were attempted and rejected, and new approaches are continually being tested. Although it is too soon to say if this added effort will result in increased enrollment, we feel confident in saying that without these active recruitment efforts, the situation would be far worse.

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