

Recruiting Undergraduates with Research: Streamlining the Communication Process for Prospective Students

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There is greater competition among colleges and universities today to recruit students to meet enrollment targets. Therefore it is critical for universities to provide clear communication about the type of college experience students will receive. Northern Illinois University has spent the past two years gathering data from students, faculty, staff, community members, and outside constituents to assist in our branding efforts. In December 2010, our new brand was announced as “Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow.” This tag line reflects NIU’s culture and values, as well as how students engage with the institution. In addition to the new brand, the president also announced his Vision 2020 strategic plan to make NIU the “most student-centered research university in the Midwest.” To this end, more efforts have been made to highlight the student-centered, engaged-learning opportunities available to students—particularly those featuring undergraduate research.

In this article, we highlight ways our university uses undergraduate research to assist in recruiting prospective students. In particular, we will outline a communications plan put together by key offices on campus (enrollment management, undergraduate admission, scholarships, the honors program, and engaged learning). This communications plan establishes a timeline of key events and deadlines specific to attracting high-value students to NIU. In addition, we draw attention to a unique application process for scholarships, which allows prospective students to get a comprehensive view of several “value-added” opportunities (including undergraduate research) in a coordinated online application. We will also discuss how the key offices involved in this process worked to establish common goals in order to make our undergraduate research programs as transparent as possible. This has allowed us to disseminate information to prospective students quickly and efficiently.

Institutional Background

Northern Illinois University is in DeKalb, Illinois, about 65 miles west of Chicago. As a public university with strong attention given to student engagement, NIU is classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the category of Research Universities (high

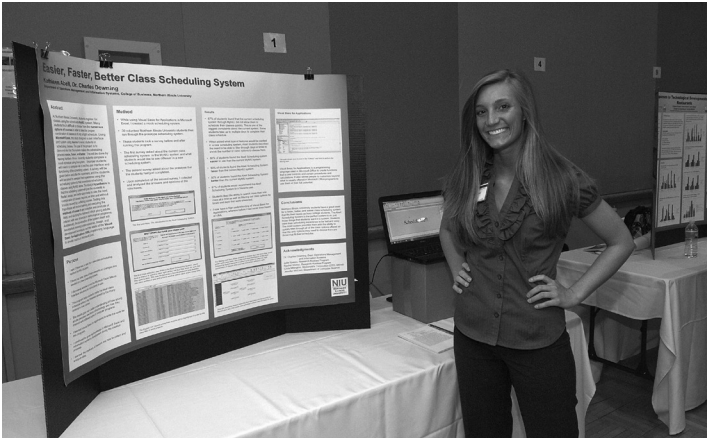
research activity) and recently was awarded the community engagement elective designation. We enroll more than 24,000 students and offer 63 undergraduate majors and 78 graduate programs.

Our New Recruitment Plan

In the fall of 2010, representatives from the scholarship office and university honors program met with the director of student engagement and experiential learning and the administrators for academic and student affairs to begin a concerted effort to align their activities with NIU’s Vision 2020 plan. We wanted to focus on working collaboratively to recruit “high value” students using scholarships, undergraduate research, and other engaged-learning opportunities. We concluded that the target student population set by Vision 2020—students in the top 10 percent to top 25 percent of their high-school class—would be intrigued not only by prestigious scholarships, but also by the academic value added by experiential learning. Promoting these opportunities was an expansion of our traditional recruitment tools and could conceivably give Northern Illinois a competitive advantage.

In addition, we revised our process for awarding general merit based scholarships for incoming freshmen and transfer students. Previously, the majority of scholarships required separate applications, submission of additional transcripts and recommendation letters, and a lengthy review process. Now, the highest-achieving students are identified and automatically offered scholarships, along with pre-approved admission to the honors program and priority consideration for the Huskie Research Rookies program—a program that pairs highly motivated students with faculty mentors to conduct research during the freshmen or sophomore year.

Other high-achieving students who meet the minimum criteria for scholarships and the honors program can apply online via a comprehensive electronic application. There is no need for them to submit separate transcripts. Thus the scholarship office and the honors program coordinate their efforts internally so that students do not have to make multiple submissions of the same information. In addition, students who have qualified for scholarships receive an elaborate scholarship package that includes an award letter,



Kathleen Abell with her poster at NIU's Undergraduate Research and Artistry Day in Spring 2011.



Katie Janssen coding audiotapes of toddlers for her Research Rookies project.

certificate, fact sheet, confirmation form and reply envelope, and fliers featuring various engaged learning opportunities (honors program, undergraduate research opportunities, themed learning communities, living-learning communities, and the First Year Experience). The scholarship packet was designed to complement university marketing and branding efforts. The first scholarship packages were sent in early November 2010, four months earlier than scholarship awards were made in previous years.

The Division of University Relations is also using undergraduate research opportunities to target prospective students. Packets of information detailing NIU's undergraduate research opportunities are being distributed to high school guidance counselors in the Chicago metropolitan area. This will allow high school counselors and NIU administrators to begin recruiting students using the lure of undergraduate research opportunities as early as a student's freshman year. The intent of these efforts is to encourage high school students looking for colleges with "value added" opportunities to consider NIU.

Outreach and Communication

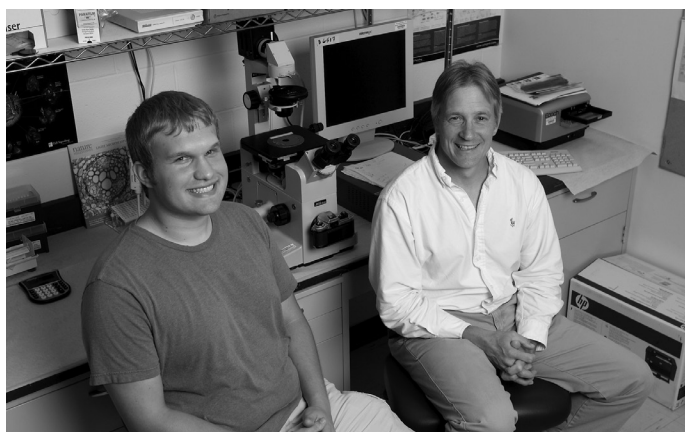
A communications plan was also developed to maximize outreach to prospective students and their families. It is our intention to use scholarships and experiential learning opportunities to impact student choice early in students' college selection process. Outreach initiatives occur after students have been admitted to NIU and continue until they arrive on campus for classes in order to ensure that students have been awarded the maximum financial assistance and are aware of all of the academic and student life opportunities available at NIU. Faculty and student-affairs staff members are involved in making phone calls and other outreach to prospective students to keep them connected to the university before the semester begins.

Another initiative was the implementation of two daylong receptions for admitted students, which replaced what was historically an open house for high school students or high school graduates who might be considering NIU. Events during these new receptions focused on educating our guests about the next steps for enrolling at NIU, as well as engaging them in the campus culture. One such event was the Scholarship Reception. All high-achieving students who had been awarded a scholarship were invited to a reception that featured brief commentary from faculty, staff, and students involved in the university honors program, undergraduate research, residential education, and the First Year Experience. They also mingled with the students attending and answered questions. The presentation by the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning featured a current Huskie Research Rookie participant explaining her research project and speaking about her experience. Students relate well to their peers; therefore, showcasing a current researcher and project can be an effective recruitment tool.

The scholarship office seeks to collaborate with the academic colleges and departments on recruitment initiatives for high-achieving students. The current decentralized process for awarding scholarships related to majors in specific fields prohibits a comprehensive plan, but we believe we can form additional partnerships that will allow us to strategically recruit talented and deserving students.

Lessons Learned

Establish Key Campus Partners. Many undergraduate research offices lack the administrative infrastructure to create comprehensive marketing and recruitment plans that effectively target prospective students. Finding ourselves in



Evan Wittke, Research Rookie with Dr. Barrie Bode, Chair and Professor of the Biological Science Department.

a similar situation, the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning met with representatives from both academic and student affairs in the fall of 2010, which helped to create buy-in, identify roadblocks, and develop new processes that would fit the needs of each administrative office. By working together, we were able to streamline the application processes for new students and learned how to promote each others' resources.

By bringing the right people to the table, we helped encourage other offices to use our undergraduate research programs as a recruitment tool for prospective students. In essence, everyone became an advocate for any program that could be used to recruit potential students. This joint effort has alleviated some of the pressure on the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning to be the sole promoters of undergraduate research opportunities at NIU, while at the same time giving the honors program and the scholarship office another "value added" opportunity to advertise to prospective students. As mentioned earlier, an example of this type of program is the Huskie Research Rookies, which pairs highly motivated freshmen, sophomore, and transfer students with faculty mentors who can guide them through the process of undergraduate research. This program is directly in line with the president's goal of making NIU a more student-centered research university.

As a result, we have been able to use the Rookies program to recruit freshmen into undergraduate research, as well as sophomores. We have taken students from our current cohort of Research Rookies to events designed for prospective students so that our Rookies can share their research experiences. Prospective students are able to hear from freshmen and sophomores who have had hands-on research experience under the guidance of full-time

faculty members. These prospective students are given a glimpse of a personalized freshman experience with a faculty mentor at a large public research university. The success of the coordinated efforts is demonstrated by the significant increase in applications that have been submitted at the time of this writing, in comparison to last year at this time. At this time last year, fall 2010, only 17 applications for the Huskie Research Rookies program had been submitted. However, this year the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning has received over 130 applications for the program from incoming and prospective students, with 27 percent of applicants scoring 25 or higher on the ACT and 42 percent having a high school grade-point average of 3.5 or above.

Create a Common Language. In order to successfully coordinate student recruitment by offices across campus, we found that it was important to first create an internal language that could be understood by everyone involved in this process. This language was created for administrative offices under both academic and student affairs so that personnel could understand how undergraduate research opportunities align with Vision 2020, thus bolstering buy-in from both sides. Three years ago, when NIU's strategic plan was announced, Kuh's (2008) high-impact educational practices were used as the framework. As a result, when we refer to "engaged learning" or "value added opportunities," we are referencing Kuh's list of ten high-impact practices.

While it was important to create a common language for offices to use when communicating with each other, it also was essential to create a common language for everyone to use when recruiting students. By creating this common language, prospective students are able to hear the same message from several different offices. This has allowed each office, whether dealing with honors, scholarships, or experiential learning, to reinforce the kinds of "value added" opportunities available from a range of offices. For example, when marketing undergraduate research as a special opportunity, the key points used to communicate this message include the fact that students who participate in undergraduate research at NIU gain experience in their major or area of interest while working under the direct guidance of a faculty mentor. Participation in these types of opportunities will set students apart and make them stand out from their peers.

Timing is Critical. To coordinate programs like Huskie Research Rookies and use them as successful recruitment tools, careful consideration of timing is required. We timed the launch of the Huskie Research Rookies program in late 2010 around the announcement of Vision 2020. And we have intentionally timed our messages to incoming students to be more competitive with peer institutions. By sending out our scholarship awards early in November, hosting on-campus events for admitted students, and consistent email/mail correspondence, prospective students get multiple opportunities to hear about the various undergraduate research programs at NIU. In addition, we have also timed our recruitment process for Huskie Research Rookies to coordinate with summer orientation and the start of the academic year, in order to capitalize on existing mechanisms.

Integrate Undergraduate Research Opportunities. Working with staff from admissions, orientation, scholarships, and honors, the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning has been working to feature undergraduate research as a potential highlight of an NIU student's academic experience. The office also has been working to ensure that every NIU student has access to undergraduate research opportunities at all points in their academic career. As a result, undergraduate research is becoming an effective marketing tool for incoming freshmen as well as transfer students. In the future, utilizing the new tag line "Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow" will provide an opportunity to deliver consistent messaging for all recruitment materials.

Conclusion

We recognize that using undergraduate research as a marketing tool is not a new idea. However, for Northern Illinois University, this is relatively a new initiative. By creating new collaborations and partnerships, common applications, and a common language, NIU is moving away from being a decentralized university and is making strides toward becoming more competitive with other public research universities in its region. In doing this, we are meeting the demands of today's prospective students and giving NIU an advantage over the competition when recruiting "high value" students to our institution.

References

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Julia Spears established the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning at Northern Illinois University in 2009 and currently oversees undergraduate research, service programs, and themed learning communities. She previously worked at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) where she was the director of the Saluki Research Rookies Program, the McNair Scholars Program, and the Illinois Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation. She has been involved in undergraduate research programs since 2002. Before moving to Carbondale, she was the director of K-12 programs at Harvard Medical School. She holds a doctorate in higher education and educational administration from SIUC, and is a CUR Councilor for the Undergraduate Research Program Directors division.

Anne Hardy has worked at Northern Illinois University for 13 years and is currently the director of the scholarship office. In addition to her duties in enrollment management, Hardy is a representative on the Supportive Professional Staff Council, a member of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, and a University Experience instructor. She earned her master of science degree in industrial management from NIU.

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