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Recruiting Parents, Retaining Families

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Recruiting Parents, Retaining Families

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to share St John Fisher College Library's marketing approach to recruiting and retention of parents within the higher education community. **Design/methodology/ approach** - The objectives of this paper are achieved by connecting local experiences with other parent initiatives on university campuses throughout the country. The paper takes the approach of addressing marketing strategies for recruitment and retention of parents, while also including opportunities for these strategies to be applied. **Findings** - The findings display the library's ability to contribute to their campus recruitment and retention goals while assisting parents in connecting to the library in an informational and emotional capacity. **Originality/value** - This paper presents the academic library's perspective on a higher education initiative focused on targeting parents during the recruitment and retention processes. Academic librarians will find the most value in this paper by finding step-by-step guidelines for implementing the experiences shared by St John Fisher College's library.

Disciplines

Higher Education | Library and Information Science

Comments

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Recruiting Parents, Retaining Families

Introduction

Families visit college and university campuses every day as potential attendees. They make the rounds from Admissions to Financial Aid, possibly chat with a professor or coach, and receive a tour of the entire campus. The information families collect throughout this visit, specifically the campus tour, might be the only knowledge they gain about the college before making their decision. For libraries, the tour is the one shot chance to contribute to recruitment. At St. John Fisher College, Lavery Library has begun to treat this opportunity with a marketing approach.

St. John Fisher College (Fisher) is a small liberal arts institution, founded in the late 1940s; located in Rochester, New York, the college is based in the Catholic tradition of American higher education. Fisher offers 32 majors and 9 professional programs, most recently adding the School of Pharmacy, School of Education, and School of Nursing. With the exception of the School of Pharmacy, which does not offer an undergraduate program, all of these schools offer studies in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs.

Lavery Library is St. John Fisher College's sole library, situated in the center of campus. Originated in the 1950s on the upper floors of Kearney Hall, the library later moved into its current building structure, which was dedicated and named after Reverend Charles Lavery, former President and Chancellor of SJFC, in 1975. Over the past five years, the library has undergone many transformations including the recent addition of a Learning Commons that incorporates Office of Information Technology and Librarian Research assistance in one central location. Lavery Library currently has 8 librarians, 10 support staff, and 25 student workers, who all maintain over 160,000 volumes and over 175 databases, supporting Fisher's FTE of 4,000 students as well as over 400 faculty, often referred to as the Fisher Family.

The Fisher Family milieu is practiced by faculty, staff and students and, in turn, shared through actions and words with the families deciding whether to attend the college. In an effort to extend this warm nature while making the most of the library's first impression on visiting families, Lavery Library makes a point to notice families, parents and students, on their campus tour and specifically talk about the library's role in the Fisher Family. A typical stop at the library on one of Admissions' tours looks like this:

The library doors open and the Student Ambassador walks backward into the lobby. She is already telling the families she has brought with her about the library's new Learning Commons, a \$400,000 technology upgrade implemented over the summer. She stops the family between the Checkout Desk and the Learning Commons Help desk, a central location right inside the entrance of the library, where she can point out various services and resources the library has to offer. While she rattles off the ability for students to chat with a librarian 24/7 and explains the program that provides a librarian for every major, parents and potential students glance around.

They see groups of students studying and talking together at tables and gathered around computers. They see shelves of leisure books and videos waiting to be borrowed, students coming and going around them, creating the buzz and hum of research and discovery. Chances are a librarian will cross the floor and make eye contact with the families, smile, maybe say a quick "hello," and chat for a few minutes, providing more detail about one of the services the Student Ambassador has mentioned. The librarian wishes the family a good day on campus and continues on their way. The Ambassador finishes her brief description of the library and they all troop back out the doors.

The entire librarian interaction takes less than 60 seconds, but demonstrates an outreach initiative in action. The information being shared by the Ambassador, and the brief, warm interaction with a librarian, are a combined effort to assist in the recruitment of parents and potential students. Each service point the Ambassador mentions has been discussed and chosen by Lavery's Outreach Librarian and the Admissions Counselor who

coordinates these student guides, called Student Ambassadors, in an effort to engage parents and provide basic knowledge of services their child has access to and will be using.

Literature Review

Parents' involvement in their child's higher education is trending on a different wave than it has in past years. It used to be parents would visit their child's elementary classes and talk with the teachers; this would continue throughout middle and high school until their child left for college, at which point the children were considered adults and treated as such by their attending institution of choice. Parents were given little information, if any, and terms such as "helicopter" parent were in rampant use among higher education staff. Parents were seen as trying to be too overbearing and too involved in decisions that were now understood to be the responsibility of their child, aka, their adult student.

Recent studies, however, are bringing parents back into the higher education picture in a more realistic light. In 2008, the Chronicle of Higher Education published a review of various student surveys on the topic of parent involvement. Results showed students *wanted* more participation from their parents when making decisions like college selection and course selection (Hoover & Beckle, 2008). These "helicopter" parents were beginning to be recognized as piloting on the demand of their children. Young students are often unable to process the big picture of higher education. The costs and decisions involved just to attend an institution are serious and for parents who are funding this cost, involvement in that decision is not only imperative, but just makes sense. *Fortune* magazine recognized the weightiness of college costs in 2004 when they ran an article guiding parents through paying for their child's education while not relinquishing their retirement. For many parents, making this type of choice was a reality. The author of the article, Janice Revell, was able to provide quick snapshots of options parents had to finance an average private school's four year bill of \$112,000 while also providing for themselves down the road (2004, p117-120).

Higher education is a large financial and emotional investment by both parents and students. A 2012 Research Report by Noel-Levitz, *National Parent Satisfaction and Priorities Report*, focuses directly on parents and their growing involvement throughout their child's college years. The number one reported result of what is truly most important and matters most to parents was "Concern for the Individual" (pg. 6). Understanding the factors parents consider when evaluating a potential college for their child is a good approach to retaining the student, through their family, after their initial acceptance. Engaging parents can affect the impact many parents have on their child's decisions. At the University of Connecticut, Daniel et.al completed a study focusing on intentional communication with parents of first year students over a short period of time. They found the study group with the maximum number of mailings (4), recognized more of the content when surveyed than the other group of parents who received less information. Their findings suggest that parents are receptive to communication from the university, especially when concentrated in a brief period of time, "highlighting the importance of developing coordinated approaches to parent communication" (2009, p295).

Other campuses are also taking steps to demonstrate the importance they place on perspective students and their families. Lafayette College recently held a "coordinated charm campaign" (Hoover, 2010) to engage prospective students who have been admitted to the college. Enlisting current students, the alumni and volunteers, Lafayette contacts admitted students through letters, phone calls, campus events and receptions and more. The importance of engaging the whole family is also understood and parents of current students are encouraged to contact parents of admitted students to answer questions, share their family's story, and most importantly make a warm connection (2010).

Franklin & Marshall College takes a similar approach to their campus tours as St. John Fisher College. Renovating their campus visit program, Franklin & Marshall implemented new bylaws, training, scripts, and policies for their tour guide program. Within two years, they were seeing improvements in their conversion rates

(Basko, 2008, pg. 4-5). The essential factor that makes all of these new initiatives and programs successful is the inclusion of the campus, not just one Admissions Office and their student workers. St. John Fisher's Lavery Library is taking the lead in proactively collaboration with the Admissions Office and creating a parent targeted approach from the time a family visits the campus, through acceptance, and then their child's attendance.

Prospective Parents

The Admissions Office

The Office of Admissions at St. John Fisher College currently employs a cadre of 65 students as Student Ambassadors. The Ambassadors main responsibility is to provide campus tours to prospective families. Last academic year (2011/2012), Ambassadors gave 1575 families tours of the library, usually grouped in tours of three or four families at a time. In order to become a Fisher Ambassadors, students go through an interview process for the position and, if selected, participate in extensive training before providing a tour on their own. Training may include meeting with a college Admissions team member, reviewing the tour manual, observing a tour, and completing a tour under supervision.

Four years ago, Lavery Library contacted the Admissions Office to initiate collaboration with the Ambassadors. Collaboration began between both departments to organize sample scripts about the library, based on major, for each Ambassador to share during tours. The sample scripts included details of database names and at least one physical item an Ambassador could point out on the Main floor of the library, which is where tours enter the building. The two year process was not a success, and it was short lived. The scripts were too long and included too much walking, too much time, and not enough immediate relevance to the prospective student or their family. When essential participating staff from the Admissions Office left the college, Lavery Library started over again with the replacement staff. This time, however, a better strategy would lead to successful library integration into campus tours.

The Admissions Office has an official Student Ambassador manual that includes over twenty pages of details for every tour stop on campus. Although the college is a young 65 years old, information about campus history is included as well. When the Library began building a relationship with Admissions a second time, it was discovered the manual sections regarding the library were horribly outdated. A major revision was done immediately and a timeline was set up for an annual review of the library's information included in the manual. Each summer Lavery Library contacts Admissions to review the library's information and provide changes if necessary.

The 3 Point Strategy

Throughout each Fall semester, the Ambassadors have team training sessions during the weekends. During the initial setup of the current collaboration between the library and the Admissions, the Library attended several of these training events, and once, sent a recorded video chat to be played. The purpose of the video and visits were to familiarize Ambassadors with changes in the library and emphasize major points they should be aware of. These opportunities were also used to give gentle reminders about vocabulary. In the past, a common phrase for Ambassadors to use with families was, Fisher students could "rent" laptops, instead of "borrow" laptops, which implies a cost involved to access these resources. After touring the library, several parents had approached the Checkout Desk and asked how much it cost to rent a laptop. The library responded by purposefully targeting the language used during campus tours. Another example of this would be the explanation of the library's Research Chat service. This service provides research help 24/7 through online instant messaging. Ambassadors are encouraged to say, "it might not be a Fisher librarian, but they'll know how to help you use Fisher's resources," rather than saying, "it probably won't be anyone from Fisher."

As the relationship between the Library and Admissions grew, it became apparent the amount of information the Ambassadors needed to memorize was voluminous. The library decided to adopt a new tactic to layer upon the extensive library section in the Ambassador manual. Each year the Library chooses three things for all Ambassadors to focus on during the library portion of their tours. When these three things are determined, vocabulary is once again stressed. The three items are selected for their importance and their connection to parents who are touring with prospective students. For example, in fiscal year 2012-2013 the Ambassadors were told to stress the library's 24/7 chat service, a librarian for every major, and the completion of the library's newly implemented Learning Commons.

Fisher's Lavery Library participates in OCLC 24/7 chat service consortium. This service provides access to a research help during all hours of the day or night. While the librarian may not be from Fisher, they are able to access Lavery Library's web-pages, contact information, policies, subject guides, etc. in order to assist students at that current moment until they can visit with a Fisher librarian. This service is often referred to when describing last minute projects or studying that might occur late at night after the library is closed. Parents can be reassured their child will have access to knowledgeable staff even when their child is home during breaks. Parents also have this service as a card in their hand to throw out when communicating with their child, who might be having a hard time working on an assignment and the library is closed or a librarian is unavailable.

Lavery Library also provides a "librarian for every major" liaison program. Lavery has eight librarians who each work closely with various departments and programs at Fisher. Every single major has a librarian assigned to its department. Most librarians cover many different subject areas. The "librarian for every major" program stresses to parents that there are specific individuals who will be expert in their child's areas of study and that the library is deeply involved with the faculty and academic life on campus. During the physical tour, each guide points out the Help Desk where librarians are available for most hours the library is open, including on the weekends. Explaining the "librarian for every major" program allows parents to see there are many people available to help their child, day or night.

Both of the above initiatives are supported by activities across the nation. The University of Vermont creates online content for parents focused around frequently encountered situations they may experience with their child. The co-founder of the software package used by Vermont says the goal is to "arm parents with smart and relevant things to say to their son or daughter" (Klein, 2004, 58). By Lavery providing three key points to parents during a visit to St. John Fisher College, parents are not overwhelmed or over stimulated, rather they are given quick tips to communicate with their child about, whether it being during a homework crisis or a holiday break at home.

The third fact provided for the past fiscal year's tour guides is the library's newly completed renovation to create a Learning Commons on the Main floor of the building. While the scope of the project is complex and includes combining software, hardware and a combined service desk, the takeaway point for Ambassadors to share was crafted with parents in mind. The Ambassadors were asked to talk about the "\$400,000 technology upgrade." To a prospective parent, the ease of the combined service desk doesn't yet resonate with their understanding of how their child will be doing work on campus. A simplified technology upgrade provides the understanding to all parents, regardless of their own college or technological experiences, that the library is a location that provides up to date and current resources for their child to use. The dollar figure informs parents that St. John Fisher College is invested in improvements and quality performance of the library and campus.

The Librarian Greeter

Referred to in our earlier snapshot of a Fisher tour, if a librarian is available and working within the vicinity of a visiting tour, they are encouraged to pause and introduce themselves. These interruptions provide the opportunity for Lavery librarians to act as "greeter" and create a welcoming feeling for the visiting families. In an effort to allow the tour to continue on its timed schedule, Lavery librarians do not interrupt for a long period of

time, but just long enough touch on a few key emotional elements. These quick greetings are time on task pop-ins. They could come from any of Fisher's eight librarians who might be on their way to teach a class, sitting at the Help Desk, crossing the Main floor on their way to perform some other responsibility, etc. The idea is to provide eye contact with a smile and acknowledge the families presence on campus. Ann McClure notes in her list of *Five Campus Tour Traps*, "The campus won't seem very welcoming if everyone avoids a tour or gives the group the evil eye (2009). For example, at St. John Fisher College, one of the repeated phrases heard refers to the "Fisher Family." The "Fisher Family" encompasses the warm and collaborative environment the faculty, staff, and students embrace at the college. When parents hear a librarian refer to this during their "pop-in" to the tour, they're able to recognize and understand that the library is a part of that family. This type of campus wide enrollment strategy provides a consistent message about the core institutional values (Daniel, et al 2001).

Open House Events

Another opportunity for the library to join the campus in sharing Fisher's potential with visiting families is during Open Houses. These events are held two or three times a semester and provide the opportunity for families to do a little comparison shopping. At St. John Fisher, Open House consists of a vendor fair type setup with departments of the college providing posters, pamphlets, and people at separate tables throughout the room. During Open House weekends, families also have the opportunity to attend academic sessions about majors and programs offered at St. John Fisher as well as a tour of campus.

Parents and their students can gather a lot of information about the college in one central location. For first generation parents, who have no idea what to expect, attending an Open House can be an eye opening experience. Having a table for the library gives librarians the chance to extend their sense of the Fisher Family to parents while informing them of beneficial services their children will have access to at Fisher. Even by asking, "What other schools have you been to?" and showing a knowledge of how Lavery's resources compare to other local college libraries', will assist these first generation parents in thinking in such a comparative way. What makes us different? How do we really measure up?

For the parents who have been through this process many times before, either as students themselves, or with multiple children in their family, Open House gives the library a chance to really sell those services that stand out. For example, Interlibrary Loan provides free access to books and articles not available through Lavery Library. This service is a selling point for Fisher because of the consortiums they participate in that make this service fast and free. Parents who hear their child can access unlimited resources through Fisher's library quickly and efficiently, versus being charged or waiting a long time at another institution, may be a factor when weighing the support available for their child's educational success. For those parents who attended college themselves, this also gives them the opportunity to see and hear how higher education has changed since they attended. For example, hearing about the online resource access versus using physical journal or reference book collections.

Awareness of competition and where your library stands is crucial to understanding parents' perspective and conveying the best information to them. Daniel et al. (2001) recognized the proportion of freshmen who applied to six or more institutions increase fourfold since 1967. Parents want the best for their children in terms of value and overall cost. In 2010, the Chronicle of Higher Education noted an increase in Admissions Inflation. The applications at institutions continue to grow as families look at more options. In the case of the University of Chicago, this growth was 43% in one year.

St. John Fisher College is situated in a city with two well-known universities: University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology. Fisher is also situated down the street, literally, from Nazareth College. Open House is a chance for the library to share comparisons and connections to these local institutions. At Fisher we are able to provide most of the same resources these larger institutions are assumed to have and sharing this knowledge with parents helps them better evaluate all the factors of Fisher's library: librarians focused on majors,

same resources as larger local universities, up to date technology, smaller campus atmosphere with warm and friendly staff, etc.

Approaching parents outside a Fisher vacuum enables the library to better communicate the big picture of comparing colleges. It also assists parents in connecting the dots between other campuses they've visited in terms of where the library fits in to the campus culture. Perhaps if they didn't stop to think about all of these factors coming together, they're able to after attending Fisher's Open House.

Admitted Parents

Once the hard work of recruitment has been completed and students have accepted their admission into the college, their induction into the Fisher Family begins through a curriculum called the "First Year Program." As part of this program, Fisher has a two-step orientation for incoming freshmen students. In August there is a traditional three day orientation the weekend before classes begin, which includes an introduction to academic, social, cultural, and religious activities on campus. Months before students move onto campus and participate in the August session, in May, there is a one day pre-orientation and registration day for incoming students and their parents called Great Beginnings.

During Great Beginnings, students follow one track of meetings and presentations while their parents follow another. For parents, sessions are held that provide academic information and procedures, financial information, student life/campus resources, and tips for adjusting to college life. Faculty and staff join the parents during lunch to share more information and answer questions in a more casual setting.

The Great Beginnings program has been in existence for nearly thirty years. The schedule is constantly changing as needs develop, but the mainstay sessions for parents include information from the Wellness Center, Security and Financial Aid. In 2007, the library became a part of Great Beginnings for the first time. During the next four years, librarians took full advantage of the opportunity to man a table at the information fair, eat with parents at lunch, and teach a library informational session for parents. Mandatory attendance by parents for the library presentation has been inconsistent over the past few years, becoming optional instead. The time allotted has varied over the years, contributing to the flexible and innovative approaches the library has taken in participating.

The goal of the library parent session is to familiarize parents with a 21st century academic library. There are three specific objectives: identify the physical components of the library such as number of floors, computers, and service desks; describe the accessibility of library resources such as ebooks and databases; and recognize common transition items for first year students such as expanded use of citations styles and an introduction to scholarly articles.

The intent is not to create engaged library users out of the parents, but rather to educate them to the point where they can understand the vocabulary used by their child or recognize when they are doing library research at the dining room table. A simple narrative is shared with parents to illustrate this point.

Imagine calling your child to see how they are doing and they respond frustrated because they need to find one more scholarly article for their paper due tomorrow. Not only are they having trouble finding an article, but they know the article will be long and they have to cite it before finishing their paper.

A parent who attends the library session at Great Beginnings will be able to recognize what their child means by "scholarly article" and the article is long for a purpose. They also know a librarian can help alleviate the stress their child is experiencing trying to search for the article as well as help them with their citations. The parent is now strongly poised to respond to their child's frustration with an encouraging response that will defuse tension and suggest success.

Retaining Parents

Progress evolves from evaluating effectiveness and making changes where necessary. This includes the interest in determining if the library's outreach approach to parents has been of use. In the Fall of 2012, a pilot study was conducted in order to obtain feedback from parents on the library instruction session at Great Beginnings. A random sample of 100 parent emails was obtained from Institutional Research and a nine question survey was sent out. The originally invitation, if unanswered, was followed by a reminder email one week later. A total of 14 parents completed our survey. While the number of responses was too low to generalize any results, we did glean a few details to help with further studies and outreach efforts to parents. When asked which interactions with the library they have had, 13 out of 14 parents said they visited the library on a tour, while only half the parents had come to the library session at Great Beginnings. This year the Great Beginnings library session was optional and not mandatory. These small findings encourage us to continue the relationship between Admissions and being involved with Student Ambassador training. The seven attendees whom responded they visited the library on a tour *and* attended Great Beginnings, showed growth in their understanding of the library building, our services, and our research help available. Each initiative is important; together they are powerful.

Looking forward, there are many ways to continue engaging parents with the college and library of which their child attends and utilizes. Future studies will also gauge cognitive advances of parents as well as bring into inclusion any newly initiated outreach efforts. Employing other institutions implementations, a few future steps include implementing a Parent Newsletter, contributing a library information pamphlet to the folder parents receive on a campus tour, using SMS Marketing Software to update parents on library highlights, events, and programs, participating in parents' weekend or hosting a parents' weekend to bring parents into the library and explore all the services offered, while gaining information about the building, people, and support. Some libraries are creating parent listservs to provide a place for parents to communicate and learn from each other. Other ideas include creating a parent focused website to provide information, guidance, tips, etc. for parents as a point of need when they need it.

Conclusion

The conclusion, after reviewing current initiatives and future opportunities, is that parents are an important resource to their child and should, therefore, be brought into the college's culture and engaged just as much as their child is. Providing the information and resources to parents of students allows the institution to build upon and utilize an entire support structure that is already in place within the family unit. Allowing the parents to feel connected to their child's higher education institution engages them to help their child to feel connected to that institution. Recruitment and retention are a crucial aspect of higher education. Institutions understand they are no longer recruiting and retaining just the student, but the whole family.

St. John Fisher's Lavery Library took a three step approach to targeting parents: providing manageable library information for Ambassadors to share on campus tours, participating in Open House weekends, and partaking in Great Beginnings. This approach shared the logical informational knowledge needed by parents and students to learn about Fisher's library, while also joining logic with the emotional aspect of higher education. Including the library in the concept of the Fisher Family and relating detailed examples of how the library's skills and services can support their child throughout their college experience, demonstrates to parents a campus culture that cares and is aware of their entire family's needs and goals. A favorite anecdote of our Outreach Librarian includes a past Great Beginnings Instruction Session she administered. After the session was over, one father who had attended, went to get his daughter, brought her back to the library and asked the librarian to repeat everything she had just said. When finished, the librarian asked if she forgot anything. The father remembered and shared a

few added things with his daughter. He obviously felt the library would be a great benefit to his daughter and now he and his child had made a comfortable connection they could rely on in the future.

Before beginning a program to target parents, there are a few key tips to remember. Identify your campus culture and branding messages. Be aware of how your library fits into that culture and use branding to your advantage. Identify those offices you'd like to build relationships with in order to target messages to parents. It might be the Admissions Office or it might be Campus Life. It might just be both! Share this initiative with the entire library. One person cannot move this concept forward, but when all staff are on board with the mission of the library, the campus culture, and the library's role in serving the entire campus from recruitment through education and retention, this message conveys itself much stronger. Finally, be active. Most children strongly rely on their parents and are moving into an environment where they are expected to rely on themselves and campus staff more and more. Make this transition easier for the whole family; recruit the parents and chances are, you'll retain the whole family.

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