The Importance of Networking and Building Relationships to Further Development Activities in an Engineering Technology Department at a Public Institution

Walter W. Buchanan

Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution
Texas A&M University

Jerome Tapper

School of Engineering Technology
Northeastern University

Alireza Rahrooh

Department of Engineering Technology
University of Central Florida

Abstract

This paper shows the importance of networking and building relationships to further development activities in an engineering technology department at a public institution, so that the department can increase in quality for its graduates. It will also show the results of what this process can bring about, i.e., creating a margin of excellence so that the department's programs can move to a higher level with the extra funds that this process can bring about.

Introduction

Starting in about the 1960s, state funding for public institutions have been on the decline. It was usual then for two-thirds of a public institution's funding to come from the state. Today things are dramatically different. A recent survey found that state funding can vary from eight percent to up to 57 percent of a state four-year institution of higher education's budget. On the low end were national research institutions and on the high end were predominantly teaching intuitions. [1] The rational from the respective state legislatures appeared to be that research institutions could get by for less due to the grant money they took in. Their student tuition also tends to be higher. However, funding from the state and student tuition is not enough. Almost all public institutions now must engage in fundraising to be able to balance their budgets. The question is how to go about doing this? This paper will focus on strategies used in selected public engineering technology programs.

Vehicles for Fundraising

When one of authors arrived at Texas A&M University as the department head of their Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution Department, he observed that the programs in the department had very strong industrial advisory committees. These committees were composed of alums of Texas A&M who were very loyal to the institution. There were also members of the committees who were employees of companies that hired the programs graduates. Both of these groups, there was some overlap of course, saw the value of the programs and the high quality of the programs' graduates. It was therefore natural that these members would want to support the programs by encouraging their respective companies to donate both cash and state-of-the-art equipment to the department's programs. Some of these members were also willing to make personal donations. To make this happen it was necessary to engage the members in the mission of the programs and make them feel a part of them. [2]

Shortly after arrival, the department head organized a departmental development council. The idea was to have semiannual meetings to inform the members of both the mission and the needs of the different programs. In so doing funds were generated for the department's programs. [3] After a couple of years, however, it was found that due to the different missions of the departmental programs, i.e., Electronics Engineering Technology/Telecommunications Engineering Technology, Manufacturing and Mechanical Engineering Technology, and Industrial Distribution, it was better to separate these fundraising efforts out and have them become a session in the semiannual industrial advisory council meetings that each of the programs had. The result was three separate development groups that could focus on the mission and needs of their respective programs.

Networking and Building Relationships

As stated above, although the development sessions at the industrial advisory committee were productive, it was soon found out that more was necessary to have a truly effective fundraising program. It should be pointed out that the department's industrial advisory committee also interacted with the department programs' students to help improve curricula in the different programs. [4] The head of the Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution at Texas A&M therefore started making visits to the different companies that the industrial advisory committee members were employed at. He has made 55 corporate visits over a two year period. Much was learned about these different corporations and what they needed from the graduates. Also, working with the Texas A&M's development office, it was found that inviting donors and prospects to Aggie football games was a good way to get to know donors and prospects as well as to let them know more about the departmental programs and their mission. Over the course of three football seasons twenty of these donors or prospects and their spouses and

friends have been taken to Aggie football games. The appreciation and relationship building immediately became obvious as well as the information that was exchanged.

Results of Relationship-Building Activities

A spreadsheet was developed and maintained of the persons visited during the 55 company visits as well as the persons taken to the 20 football games at Texas A&M University. After a little more than a two year period over two million dollars in cash plus equipment donations have resulted. One of the most impressive results was a million dollar endowment for a new fluid power laboratory. It is also apparent that more donations are on the way. Similar tactics and results have taken place at the other two authors' institutions.

Summary and Conclusions

The result of all these efforts have become obvious and are now really paying off. We now have more engaged alums and corporate partners who are willing to donate and work with our programs. It has become a quid pro quo relationship where corporations feel we are responsive to their needs of turning out graduates, who can hit the ground running and are educated in state-of-the-art laboratories, so that they can be immediately productive at their respective companies. It has truly become a win-win situation.

References

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WALTER W. BUCHANAN
Dr. Buchanan is J. R. Thompson Chair Professor and Head of the Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution at Texas A&M University. He received his BSE and MSE from Purdue University, and his Ph.D. and J.D. from Indiana University. Walt is a P.E. in six states, and is Chair of the Engineering Technology Council of ASEE. He has written over 100 papers on engineering technology education, and is a Chair of the Professional Engineers in Higher Education Division in NSPE.

JEROME TAPPER
Professor Tapper is an Associate Academic Specialist in EET at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. He holds a BSEE and a MSIS, both from Northeastern University. Jerry is a Registered Professional Engineer in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts with over twenty-five years of industrial experience. He is also the author of a tool-kit based text for electrical engineering technology students, *Electronics for Engineering Technology.*

ALIREZA RAHROOH
Dr. Rahrooh is Professor of Electrical Engineering Technology and Assistant Chair of Engineering Technology at University of Central Florida. He received his BSEE, MSEE and Ph.D. from University of Akron. He has numerous publications in various reputable journals and conference proceedings. Ali is a member of the IEEE and ASEE.