ORGANIZING THE FIRST EVER CONVENTION OF ALUMNI OF SARDAR PATEL UNIVERSITY OF INDIA IN THE USA

Mulchand S. Rathod, PhD, PE
Division of Engineering Technology
College of Engineering
Wayne State University
Detroit, MI 48202

SUMMARY

During the summer of 2003, a group of alumni of Sardar Patel University (SPU), named after the first deputy prime minister of India, convened a team to organize the first ever alumni convention of SPU in the USA. This paper summarizes the logistics of a very successful alumni gathering in a foreign setting.

Sardar Patel University was established in 1955 in rural farm lands. In a span of more than forty five years, it has come to be known as a major institution of higher education in India. Today, it is a bustling university with a comprehensive set of degree programs including those in engineering and technology. It offers more than twenty post graduate degree programs besides a number of baccalaureate and diploma programs via thirty six different colleges.

Having observed a number of successful alumni gatherings in the USA of other universities from India, a group of alumni of the SPU residing in the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area came together as a leading team to organize the first ever alumni convention of its alma mater. It was decided that even though there was a predominant presence of alumni of science and engineering programs in USA, the convention would be comprehensive and would include faculty of as many, if not all the programs.

A target group of SPU graduates residing in the USA were identified to participate in the convention. Teams were organized to carry out various tasks. An advertising campaign was launched in ethnic periodicals and radio/television programs besides alumni to alumni email and letter writing campaign. Finally, a whole day convention took place in North Brunswick, NJ over the 2003 Labor day weekend with approximately five hundred attendees mostly from NY/NJ metropolitan area.

This paper summarizes the results, activities, and lessons learned from this first ever convention of a foreign university in the USA and for others to follow.

INTRODUCTION

Sardar Patel University is located in Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat India. It is named after the first deputy prime minister and the architect of modern India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a trusted lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi. Established in 1955 in rural farm lands, today it is a center of the most prosperous region known as Charotar. The university has an enrollment of more than thirty thousand students and has fifty affiliated colleges located in three campuses (Vallabh Vidyanagar, Anand and Karamsad). It is a comprehensive university offering baccalaureate, masters, diploma, and doctoral degree programs.[1,2]

Since its founding, the university has continued to increase its programs and curricula to meet the future challenges as evidenced by its expansion into new and emerging areas in arts, sciences, education, information technology, engineering, business, management, and performing arts to name a few.[2] Its alumni base is spread throughout the world including a large number being settled in USA.

A group of those alumni living in the metropolitan NY/NJ area had a vision of organizing the first ever convention of SPU graduates in the USA. The following sections provide a brief overview of that vision, logistics for arrangements, and successful inaugural gathering during the 2003 Labor Day weekend in North Brunswick, NJ.[1]

CONVENTION VISION

A significant portion of our life revolves around "work," however according to the "Work in America" survey about 40% of us plan our careers.[14] The remaining numbers rely on chance, take the only jobs available, or follow tips from friends and relatives. The SPU alumni are no different from this phenomenon. If we look at the anecdotal information available, the SPU prepared its graduates well for the professional life even though they may not have received specific education in a particular arena of their success.[1]

Weisbrod and Hamilton identified "Globalization" of US economy as "second industrial revolution" in an article in the 1990s.[15] Their report could very much be expanded to cover the professional spectrum by generalizing in the following manner. We need to understand impact of global trade on the skills and retraining needs of technical workforce. The effects of public policies and business priorities on the professionals and education institutions' response to global changes and demands are essential considerations for continuing immigration of workforce from abroad. The SPU alumni very much understood

that need which lead to having a large number of them being settled in north America.

Having observed a number of alumni events of Indian Institute(s) of Technology and other universities from India, a group of SPU alumni convened on its own in 2003. Its vision was to organize this first ever convention. It was determined based on certain members gut feeling that since a number of their alumni peers resided in metropolitan NY/NJ area, it should be easier to bring them together in that region. The group did not want to wait a long time, since people's enthusiasm could go down with time to do such a program. As a result, the 2003 Labor day weekend was selected. To allow for travel time, Sunday, 8/31/03 was selected as the convention day.

Based on models of many professional societies and events, the group was organized into several committees (Venue, Host, Registration, Program, Publication, Funding/Fund Raising, Meals, Presentations/Sessions, Entertainment, Volunteers). The teams reviewed a number of university alumni programs, projects, and activities [3-12] and depending on individual and collective experiences, the convention agenda was determined. One important theme the team wanted to convey to the alumni in its contacts and literature was the fact that the convention was about coming together, feeling good about alumni successes, and learning more about each other and alma mater. There was neither a goal nor a mention of donation solicitation through out the program.

Once the date and location were determined, there was a sustained effort to reach out to the alumni. It included personal contacts, individual members writing letters or sending emails, advertisement in ethnic newspapers and radio and television programs, setting up the alumni web site, etc. Each committee went to work. A number of committees held several meetings and telephone conferences. The dedication of each individual really began to shine during this pre-convention period.

PROGRAMS/ACTIVITIES

Program and activities began at 11:00 am with registration. A nominal fee of $25 was charged to each attendee who received a name badge, a folder (containing the program, convention booklet, and books about SPU, Charutar Vidya Mandal, Sardar Patel, Bhaikaka), and alumni data form. A buffet lunch provided the venue for alumni to meet and to begin socializing with each other.

At 1:00-3:00 pm, there were four concurrent sessions for the following faculties: Arts, Business, and Performing Arts; Mathematics and Sciences; Computers, Engineering, and Technology; Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Allied Health. Each session had a moderator, co-moderators, and a facilitator whose role it was to maintain the session alive and interesting. This was a very

important forum to give each alumnus a chance to discuss his/her experience. Topics included the most memorable event while a student, funniest experience, aspect of education that helped with successful career, and how to help SPU. A designated person served as recorder of the alumni comments. Each forum was also recorded on video for a historical perspective.

During 3:00-4:00 pm and 6:00-7:00 pm time slots, a special photo exhibit showing life of Sardar Patel provided a venue for the attendees to meet and greet old friends along with snacks.

The next session (4:00-6:00 pm) was a common assembly for all alumni. It included a university video presentation with a message from the vice chancellor, greetings from the chief guest Dr. C L Patel (Chair, Charutar Vidya Mandal, an organization administering the city, educational institutions, and SPU) with a documentary about New Vallabh Vidyanagar (a new addition), and summary presentations from the concurrent breakout session moderators.

At 7:30 pm, a gala banquet and dinner program was launched. It contained recognition and plaque presentations to sponsors and special guests besides a buffet dinner. This was followed by a musical entertainment program by a special folk singing team of artists from Gujarat, India. Table 1 summarizes the program highlights. The photographs at the end of the article give glimpses of the convention. More information about the event may also be found from the web site of the organization.[16]

ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS

Approximately, five hundred persons attended this convention. Most of the participants were from the NY/NJ metropolitan area ranging from the class of 1959 (first graduating class) to 2000. Overall, the comments from the alumni was complimentary and memorable about the event.

Following were the suggestions and comments: University/colleges need to keep updated record of alumni; publish a book on alumni and their experiences; coming together was a good beginning; form an alumni chapter in each state; organize convention every year and rotate it in different cities; periodically publish alumni magazine; every attendee should submit at least one more alumni name and address for the alumni database; set up communication and/or mechanism to transfer technology and help current students; increase convention advertisement and include more ethnic media; provide avenue to purchase books about the SPU, Vallabh Vidyanagar, etc.; and bring spouse to the next convention.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

In the era of declining resources from traditional sources, it is utmost important for universities to build a strong alumni base. There are a number of ways to reach out to the alumni as shown in a small list of university web sites and alumni magazines.[6-13] For a foreign university such as SPU, it is not common to have an office of alumni relations. It is a good time to organize such an entity. This convention provides an excellent example to organize such a forum as long as there is a common vision among a group of dedicated alumni.

In conclusion, this was a very successful event and teams are already working to arrange the 2004 convention.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On behalf of the 2003 SPU alumni convention organizing committee, I would like to thank the special guests, Dr. C L Patel (Chair, Charutar Vidya Mandal); Dr. V S Patel (Former Vice Chancellor, SPU); close family members of Bhailalbhai Patel, aka Bhaikaka (the architect of Vallabh Vidya Nagar and Chrutar Vidya Manadal); and the faculty and staff of SPU. All of them cared about the event and participated with genuine interest. Without the major funding from the sponsors and C Z Patel (Class of 1970 and major philanthropist), this event would not have been possible.

The author would like to thank the following for their very valuable contributions in organizing the first ever convention of SPU alumni: Manhar Patel (1967) of Saddlebrook, NJ for his vision and community activism to take on this monumental task; Harshad and Premila Patel of South Plainfield, NJ for welcoming and sharing their residence with me and my wife; Rajni P Patel (1966) of Vestal, NY for introducing me to the dedicated alumni group and making local arrangements for our trip; my wife Damayanti for spending the long weekend with the SPU alumni; Chinu Jani (1970) of Palisades, NY for organizing the session on Engineering alumni; my co-moderators Tushar R Patel (1982), Rajendra R Patel (1980) of Queens Village, NY, Rajni F Patel (1967) of Parsippany, NJ for helping me run the largest alumni group session.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to thank a number of individuals who helped me directly or indirectly in getting me involved in the event, and the organizing team for making the information and material available for this paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "Sardar Patel University Alumni Convention 2003," SPU, Inc., Monmouth Junction, NJ, USA, 8/31/2003.

2. "Charutar Vidya Mandal: 1945 to 2003," Charutar Vidya Mandal, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India, 2003.

3. "Mississippi State Alumnus," Mississippi State University Alumni Association, Mississippi State, MS, USA, v79, n2, Summer 2003.

4. "Wayne State Magazine," Wayne State University Alumni Association, Detroit, MI, USA, v17, n3, Summer 2003.

5. Rathod, M.S., "Responsibilities of Alumni," General Session Presentation, 1st Alumni Convention of SPU, North Brunswick, NJ, USA, August 31, 2003.

6. "The Pharos," Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, Menlo Park, CA, USA, v66, n3, Summer 2003.

7. "Momentum: Above and Beyond," Mississippi State University Bagley College of Engineering, Mississippi State, MS, USA, Fall 2003.

8. "Alumni Can Help in Making Career Connections," http://www.washington.edu/ alumni/, August 2003.

9. "Legacies for the University of Bristol," http://www.bris.ac.uk/alumni/, August 2003.

10. "50 Ways You Can Help Clemson," http://alumni.clemson.edu/, August 2003.

11. "Alumni Email," http://www.stanford. edu/home/alumni/index.html, August 2003.

12. "Four Areas in Which Major Gift Support is Absolutely Critical to University's Continued Excellence," http://www.mcgill.ca/alumni/, August 2003.

13. "Join the Career Network," http://www. bc.edu/friends/, August 2003.

14. "Michigan Career Outlook 2000," Bureau of Research Statistics, Michigan Employment Security Commission, Detroit, Michigan.

15. Weisbrod, G., Hamilton, K., "Globalization of Technology and the Economy: Implications for Mechanical Engineers," ASME, June 1994.

16. "2003 SPU Alumni Convention," http://www.spualumni.org/, December 2003.

BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR

Mulchand S Rathod, PhD, PE, professor of Division of Engineering Technology, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, served as the director/chair of the Division during 1987-2003. His prior appointments include State University of New York at Binghamton (1979-87), Tuskegee University (1976-78), Jackson Engineering Graduate Program (1975-76), Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) of California Institute of Technology (1980-81), IBM (1981-85), and

B&B Consulting Engineers (1975-76). Prof. Rathod earned his B.E. (Mechanical) degree from Sardar Patel University in India (1970), and M.S. (1972) and Ph.D. (1975) degrees in Mechanical Engineering from Mississippi State University. Dr. Rathod was awarded 1995 Dedicated Service Award , 1998 Ben C. Sparks Medal, and 2001 BMW award, all by ASME.

Table 1. SPU Convention Program

SPU Alumni Convention 2003
Venue
Ramada Inn 999 Route 1 South, North Brunswick, NJ 08902
Program
11:00 am   Registration 12:00 noon   Lunch 1:00 pm   Session One 3:00 pm   Break 1/Exhibits 4:00 pm   Session Two 6:00 pm   Break 2/Exhibits 7:30 pm   Banquet/Dinner 9:00 pm   Entertainment

The 2003 SPU Alumni Convention Photos (From left top corner clockwise: Registration, Volunteers, Photo Exhibits, Patel Family, Gandhi-Nehru-Patel, Session Participants)