

Student Recruitment by Faculty Phone-a-Thons

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Abstract

Phone-a-thons are an enrollment effort that began in earnest in the 1980s as a method for recruiting college-bound students. Often, this technique manifests in the employment of current students to staff phone banks and call prospective students during prime time periods. Although enrollment management functions are not part of the traditional faculty role, the authors describe a program of involving faculty from the College of Engineering, Forestry and Natural Sciences in an annual phone-a-thon. Each year since the fall of 2005, faculty have been organized to call students who have submitted an application to study in an engineering, science, mathematics, or forestry major at Northern Arizona University, but have not yet committed to enroll in the university via deposit. The faculty's phone call mission is to reach out to this selective group of prospective students in a nurturing manner in order to exemplify our student-focused environment, to answer questions, and to increase yields. This paper will present summary data with conclusions about the effectiveness of this annual effort, which takes place over the course of two evenings each year.

Introduction

Communication with prospective university students often begins as early as the middle school years with admissions offices beginning dialogues about college entrance requirements and pathways to student success¹. It is not until the high school years, and in particular, the junior and senior years that telephone recruitment campaigns are used by colleges and universities. A phone-a-thon is one such telemarketing effort. It is best described as "the planned use of the telephone as a recruitment, follow up, and retention medium in conjunction with traditional recruitment programs to increase the yield rate from inquiries to admits to enrolled students in the most cost efficient and timely manner"². Although phone-a-thon efforts typically originate out of the institution's admissions office, there are multiple audiences - including alumni, current students and faculty members - who may be tapped to participate in the calling of prospective students. Regardless of the callers or the use of multiple phone-a-thon efforts by an admissions office, the practice of phone-a-thons is not a new one. Much of the literature dates back to 1980s, with the practice emerging in the 1970s^{3,4}. Sedwick et al⁵ cite a Carnegie study that confirmed the use of telephone recruitment activities throughout the United States by the mid-1980s, with 36% of all institutions reporting that they had engaged in such activities.

Although Hossler⁴ notes that cultivation by faculty is an important factor in the final decision-making process of prospective students, specific citations and evaluations on the use and effectiveness of faculty phone-a-thons are extremely limited. As also cited by Hossler⁴, the work Litten and Hall demonstrates that faculty members are a valued representative of the university. Prospective students and their parents see them as a credible source of information. Faculty members can provide a comfortable safety net for those prospective families who may

have become disillusioned during the recruitment process⁶. The familiarity that faculty members possess about the college's programs, its graduates, and a discipline's opportunities can be of great value to a prospective student and their parents. Because a phone-a-thon fosters information sharing through person-to-person communication, faculty members can enjoy a unique moment to speak with prospective students and share those valuable insights at a critical point in the decision-making process for these young people³.

The ways in which students prefer to communicate is becoming of great interest in the digital age. The new generation of college-bound students can be viewed as media omnivores, who waste very little time in searching for college information that is not easily and immediately retrievable⁷. Moreover, students prefer to receive immediate responses to information inquiries in a personalized format, including phone calls. As access to and reliance on the Internet for college information searching continues, its use may be shaping decade's old understandings about the use of the telephone for college recruitment purposes.

The current use of phone-a-thons as a recruitment strategy is just one aspect of an overall campus admissions plan, yet it remains a strategy that receives minor attention within the published literature. The specific strategy of personalized telephone communication by faculty members with prospective students with similar disciplinary interest garners even less attention. Thus, this paper examines the effects of enrollment in science, engineering, and mathematics at a public university in the Southwest. It makes use of enrollment and prospect data in association with three years of faculty led phone-a-thons from 2006 to 2008.

The Phone-a-Thons

The College of Engineering, Forestry, and Natural Sciences at Northern Arizona University consists of ten academic units spanning the STEM disciplines. During the fall of 2005, the official 21-day undergraduate enrollment was a healthy 2454 students including 708 true freshmen. It was broadly recognized, however, that the College, as well as the University had underutilized capacity in 2005. As such, the College became an active participant in various recruitment activities organized by the University's admissions office or initiated by its own self. One of these activities was the faculty phone-a-thon.

For each of four years, the faculty of the College participated in a two-evening phone-a-thon event held in on consecutive days, a Tuesday and Wednesday, in late November or early December. Lists of prospect students per discipline were prepared ahead of time. These lists consisted of students who had applied to the University, were qualified for admission, but had not yet made the choice to enroll. Each department was asked to supply one or more faculty volunteers per each of the two nights to staff a phone for an hour or more. The faculty came and went to each evening as their schedules permitted; beginning at 5:00 pm and ending at around 8:00 pm. The volunteers quickly learned how to use the phone and computer system and set about to calling prospects. If the volunteer was unable to make contact with the student, he or she would leave a voice mail message, speak to a parent, and/or send a follow-up email. The faculty's phone call mission was to reach out these prospective students in a nurturing manner in order to exemplify our student-focused environment and to answer questions. The ultimate goal

was to increase yields; turning more prospects into enrolled freshman for the following fall semester.

Today, the College reports 4028 undergraduate majors as of the Fall 2009 official 21-day count with 1443 freshmen. This enrollment is an increase of 64% from 2005 and coincides with a multi-year growth in enrollment campus-wide that increased over the same time frame by 38%. These data on undergraduate enrollment for the College and the University are captured in Table 1.

Table 1. Official 21-Day Fall Head Count for College and University from 2005 to 2009

21-Day Fall Census	College Freshman	College Undergraduates	University Undergraduates
2005	708	2454	13472
2006	806	2655	14526
2007	1020	2989	15569
2008	1317	3530	16787
2009	1443	4028	18581

Phone-a-Thon Results

Although the College's enrollment had grown impressively over the four years of the late fall phone-a-thon effort, we were unsure of the real effect of this activity on enrollment. Suspicions were growing that this once a year, two-night activity was not impacting yields, and departments were beginning to resist yet another year of phone calling. As such, we took on the task of trying to evaluate the phone-a-thon's impact by looking for the call data, and comparing that information to student enrollment data. We were successful in retrieving this information from admissions for three (in 2006, 2007 and 2008) of the four years. Each attempt to contact a prospective student was recorded, as well as data on whether or not that attempt resulted in: a phone conversation with the prospect, a phone conversation with a parent, or a message left on a message machine or voice mail. Faculty also sent follow-up emails on those calls unanswered. Enrollment data was also collected for each attempted contact; permitting us to match student by student enrollment records to the phone-a-thon contacts.

Table 2 is a summary of the phone-a-thon results for three years. Over the two-night event for each of the three years, 29 to 34 faculty members volunteered. In total, they attempted to contact per each year: 570, 812, and 647 prospective students. They averaged 20 to 24 attempted contacts per faculty member, as shown in column (3) of Table 2. However, the faculty volunteers were highly variable their phone calling behavior with a few faculty members making upwards of 40 or more calls, and a few others making as few as 4 attempts. As shown in column (5), approximately 49% of those attempted contacts resulted in an actual phone conversation between a prospective student and a faculty member. The number of phone conversations per year totaled, respectively: 317, 361, and 306.

Table 2. Faculty Phone-a-Thon Yields for Two-Night Annual Events per Year

Year	Faculty	Total Contact Attempts/Faculty		Successful Phone Contact/Faculty		Enrollment Yield for Phone Contacts		Enrollment Yield for Non-Phone Contacts	
		Average	Std Dev	Average	Std Dev	Average	Std Dev	Average	Std Dev
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
2006	29	20.25	14.51	11.07	9.61	37.23%	25.42%	31.87%	16.95%
2007	34	23.88	12.75	10.62	6.23	26.92%	18.46%	18.07%	16.55%
2008	29	23.11	10.83	10.93	5.37	22.68%	12.72%	27.25%	23.92%

Columns (7) and (9) are of particular interest to this study as they provide an indication of the effectiveness of faculty phone-a-thons on enrollment yields. Column (7) reports the average enrollment yield per faculty for those prospects who actually spoke to the faculty member. This averaged value ranged from 37% in 2006 to 23% in 2008, although the data is highly variable with instances of 100% and 0% each year. The number of students enrolled each year from this population of prospects who spoke by phone with a faculty member from their intended major totaled, respectively: 103, 85, and 68. Column (9) reports the average enrollment yield for the attempted contacts, which does not include the faculty-student conversation group, ranging from a low of 18% to a high of 27% with generally less variability than the conversation group of column (7). The number of students enrolled each year from this population of attempted contact prospects totaled, respectively: 82, 77, and 86.

The averaged yield data of Table 2 indicates that there is little difference in enrollment behavior of prospective students between whether they actually spoke with a faculty member from their possible major or if they merely received a message from the faculty member via email, voice messaging or a parent contact. Over the full data set of three years, the average yield for the prospects who spoke with a faculty member was 28.5% with a standard deviation of 20.3%. Similarly, the average yield for the prospects for non-phone contact was 29.4% with a standard deviation of 44.2%. The University-wide data for the same years reports enrollment yields for prospects as 17.8%. The College-wide data for the same years reports enrollment yields for those prospects not contacted through the phone-a-thon as 17.3%.

Conclusions

University admission offices use a variety of recruitment techniques to attract prospective students to its campus. The phone-a-thon is one technique employed during the season when students are narrowing down their options and finalizing their decisions. A thorough literature review provides little concrete information about the effectiveness of phone-a-thons of any type on enrollment yields, including faculty-led ones. This study is unique in that it is one of the very few that presents numerical data to support conclusions about the effectiveness of faculty-led phone-a-thons. Over the three years of captured data, spanning from 2006 to 2008, we conclude that faculty phone-a-thons did not measurably increase enrollment yields in our College that serves engineering, science, forestry, and mathematics majors. However, the College did realize other, albeit anecdotal, benefits from its participation in the once a year phone-a-thon.

Faculty and departments became more informed about the overall student recruitment and admissions process. The activity helped to encourage cross-department camaraderie; bringing together faculty from different departments housed in different buildings focused on a common goal. And, finally, many of the involved faculty reported enjoying their phone-a-thon time citing the fun and interesting conversations they had once they connected with a prospective student by phone.

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