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Successful Publicity Strategies for a New ASEE Student Chapter

Abstract

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign recently formed a new student chapter of the American Society for Engineering Education, with its inaugural meeting in September 2009.

The student chapter officers executed a successful publicity strategy that enabled the new group to quickly draw interest from a large number of students from 16 different engineering majors. By the end of September 2009, 123 students had signed up for the new student chapter’s email list. Of these students, 65 were undergraduate students and 58 were graduate students (18 M.S. students and 40 Ph.D. students).

This paper will describe the successful publicity strategies of the new ASEE student chapter at the University of Illinois. The officers were recruited through personal connections with students known to be interested in engineering education. Additional student interest for student chapter events was generated through targeted emails advertising meetings and pointing students to the student chapter website.

The student chapter website was a key component of the publicity strategy. The website helped disseminate information regarding the new group and its mission and planned activities. The website also provided a way to collect information from interested students. Students could complete a form to submit their email addresses and some demographic information to join the email list. Students could also register for ASEE lunch seminars by completing a form on the website.

As the ASEE Student Constituent Committee facilitates the creation of new student chapters on more university campuses, the successful publicity strategies used at the University of Illinois can be applied at other universities. This paper will document those strategies for the benefit of other student chapters.

Introduction

The creation of a new ASEE student chapter requires a core group of students passionate about engineering education. These core students form the officer group and are willing to volunteer their time to organize the events and activities of the student chapter. The goal of publicity at this stage is to seek out dedicated students who will form the officer group.

After the officer group is organized, publicity efforts broaden to invite all engineering students to participate in ASEE student chapter events. These students may possess varying levels of awareness and interest in engineering education. The goal of this publicity is to increase awareness of ASEE and generate interest in ASEE events.

Because recruiting student chapter officers differs from recruiting student chapter members, the publicity effort can be planned in two phases.
Phase One: Connecting with Potential Student Chapter Leaders

The publicity goal for the first phase is to seek out students with a passion for improving engineering education. These students may already be involved in classes and organizations related to education. Personal connections are an effective way to engage these students, explain the mission of ASEE, and offer them the opportunity to help organize the new ASEE student chapter.

One approach is to identify certain courses that are likely to draw education-minded engineering students. For example, the University of Illinois offers a College Teaching course that attracts a number of engineering graduate students who are excited about engineering education. The search for Illinois ASEE student chapter officers included contacting current and past engineering students in the College Teaching class.

A second approach is to identify other university programs or groups that attract the involvement of students with a strong interest in transforming and improving engineering education. These groups can include engineering student advisory committees. The iFoundry initiative for innovation in engineering education at the University of Illinois was a gathering place for many students passionate about improving engineering education.

The iFoundry initiative describes itself in this way:

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“The Illinois Foundry for Innovation in Engineering Education (iFoundry) is a cross-disciplinary curriculum incubator in the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign dedicated to the transformation of engineering education in ways appropriate to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. … iFoundry began in the summer of 2007 as a grassroots effort among five departments in the College. … A report favorable to the establishment of a curriculum incubator was released in Spring 2008 and iFoundry was elevated to a College-supported activity by Dean Ilesanmi Adesida in August 2008.

“iFoundry admitted its first class of freshmen in Fall 2009 as part of the iFoundry freshmen experience. Those students enrolled in participating College of Engineering departments and many of the courses they took were the same as non-iFoundry students; however, new classes were developed on a pilot basis for iFoundry freshmen. … In particular, the 2009 iFoundry freshmen experience integrated coursework in critical and creative thinking skills (the missing basics) with hands-on projects and a student-run learning community (iCommunity). … iFoundry is also actively creating new courses at the University of Illinois to put in place experiences in the sophomore year in 2010 for the freshmen admitted in 2009.”
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Many of the founding ASEE student chapter officers at the University of Illinois were first involved in iFoundry. When a group of University of Illinois iFoundry student leaders attended the Summit on the Engineer of the Future 2.0 at Olin College in Needham, Massachusetts, some students expressed a desire for an engineering education student organization independent of the
college-led iFoundry initiative. A student who was already a member of ASEE encouraged the others to form a student chapter under the auspices of ASEE.

The Olin College trip was instrumental in bringing together several of the core ASEE student chapter officers. The experience motivated many students to think deeply about different systems of engineering education and to consider how the education system at the University of Illinois could be improved. Although the opportunity and the funding for such a trip may not be available at all universities, any shared experience among a core group of students interested in engineering education can provide an initial bond to help create a cohesive officer group.

The timing of the student chapter start was important. After a critical mass of students showed interest and commitment to the idea of an ASEE student chapter, Illinois ASEE officer elections were held in April 2009. The elected officers met immediately to begin organizing the new student organization and planning events for the 2009-2010 school year.

The student chapter is independent of the College of Engineering, but the Dean of the College of Engineering recognized the importance of an ASEE student chapter and generously provided financial support for the first year of the student chapter.

The publicity in phase one was successful at the University of Illinois because the student chapter founders, working primarily through personal connections, brought together a critical mass of students interested in starting an ASEE student chapter.

**Phase Two: Connecting with Potential Student Chapter Members**

While the publicity in phase one focuses on recruiting student chapter leaders, the publicity in phase two focuses on recruiting student chapter members. Recruiting members involves disseminating information about the ASEE organization and encouraging participation in ASEE student chapter events.

A student chapter website is a low-cost widely-accessible medium to distribute and collect information. At the University of Illinois, the student chapter website was the focal point of the member publicity efforts. The website was developed by a student chapter officer and is hosted on university web servers.

The Illinois ASEE website (http://asee.ec.illinois.edu) contains useful information about the student chapter. The home page welcomes visitors with a short description of the formation of the student chapter. To facilitate communication, one page of the website lists the name and email of each student chapter officer. To explain the mission and the operating guidelines of the student chapter, another page of the website contains the student chapter constitution. Other pages contain information about past and future student chapter events. To promote the affiliation of the student chapter with the national ASEE organization, the University of Illinois student chapter website contains a prominent link to the national ASEE website (http://asee.org). The student chapter website is a practical means to provide up-to-date information to a wide audience.
In addition to disseminating information, the Illinois ASEE website also collects information. University of Illinois students and faculty are invited to join the student chapter and be added to the mailing list. A Google form embedded in the website asks for name, email, year in school, and area of study. When people enter their information, the form stores the information in a Google spreadsheet that maintains the student chapter member list.

The student chapter website also enables easy advance sign-up for events with limited attendance. The Illinois ASEE student chapter hosts three lunch seminars each semester, and a free box lunch is provided to the first 25 participants who register. The website announces the lunch seminar title, speaker name, topic description, and short speaker biography. To register for the lunch seminar, students and faculty submit their names and email addresses using a Google form embedded in the website. A Google spreadsheet maintains the list of registered participants, and the sign-up form can be deactivated when the event capacity is reached.

To generate traffic to the student chapter website, the officers worked together to bring attention to the new student chapter and to point interested people to the website. The publicity push utilized mass emails, university department websites, and an engineering student organization fair.

The student chapter was advertised to undergraduate and graduate students in the College of Engineering using mass emails. The chapter was granted a one-time privilege to send out a special mass email advertising the new student chapter and its first event. Interested students were encouraged to visit the student chapter website for more information. In addition to the special mass email message, the student chapter officers contacted the Engineering Council to add an announcement to their regular email newsletter to the engineering student body.

In addition to the email push, a student chapter officer contacted the individual engineering departments to request publicity on their individual websites. In response, several departments added a link on their websites or blogs to the student chapter website. The student chapter officers also leveraged opportunities to generate publicity through face-to-face interaction. Illinois ASEE reserved a table at the engineering student organization fair at the beginning of the fall semester. Although this effort attracted a few new student chapter members, most of the event participants were freshmen engineering students who were not yet ready to think metacognitively about engineering education. Based on the ASEE event attendance thus far, ASEE participation is most attractive to graduate students and upperclassmen undergraduate students. Future Illinois ASEE publicity efforts should focus on reaching that audience.

**Results**

The intense publicity efforts of the new student chapter officers at the University of Illinois generated much interest from the engineering student body. By the end of September 2009, 123 students had signed up for the new student chapter’s email list. Of these students, 65 were undergraduate students (25 freshmen, 16 sophomores, 10 juniors, and 14 seniors) and 58 were graduate students (18 M.S. students and 40 Ph.D. students).

The September kick-off meeting attracted 27 students. The ASEE student chapter advisor Dr.
Marina Miletic spoke on the topic “Do students really learn engineering fundamentals or just study for the test?” and generated much discussion after her presentation.

The three ASEE lunch seminars during the fall 2009 semester each met their maximum registration capacity of approximately 25 participants. The limited size of the lunch meetings facilitated interaction between the student participants and the speaker.

At the September seminar, Dr. Michael Loui (Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Illinois) spoke on the topic “Adventures in Research on Engineering Education” (see Figure 1). At the October seminar, Dr. Michael Hirschi (Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs, College of Engineering, University of Illinois) challenged students with the topic “Engineering Accreditation: What is it, what good is it?” At the December lunch seminar, Dr. Charles L. Tucker III (Associate Dean for Academic Programs, College of Engineering, University of Illinois) led a discussion on “Core Conversations in Undergraduate Engineering Education.”

Figure 1: Dr. Michael Loui speaks on the topic of "Adventures in Research on Engineering Education" at an ASEE lunch seminar (September 24, 2009).

By March 2010, the University of Illinois ASEE student chapter member list contained 131 students. Figure 2 shows the distribution of ASEE student members by department as of March 10, 2010.

To put the University of Illinois student chapter numbers in perspective, the College of Engineering enrollment is approximately 6,000 undergraduate students and 2,500 graduate students. Figure 3 shows the distribution of University of Illinois engineering students by department from Fall 2009 enrollment data.
Figure 2: University of Illinois ASEE student chapter members by department (on March 10, 2010)

Figure 3: University of Illinois engineering student enrollment by department (Fall 2009 enrollment)
Conclusion

Each new ASEE student chapter faces a unique university environment, but the Illinois ASEE student chapter wanted to share the successful publicity strategy employed in its first year. The core officer group was recruited from among students who already had a passion for engineering education. This group was assembled through personal connections. After the student chapter officers were elected, the publicity efforts for member recruitment shifted to mass information distribution. Mass emails effectively pointed students to the student chapter website. By publicizing the new University of Illinois ASEE student chapter in ways that could reach the entire engineering student body, the new student chapter was able to attract participation from both undergraduate and graduate students in many different engineering departments.

Bibliography