Session 2247

The BreakAway! Award: Recognition For Potential Technology Students

Brian A. Alenskis
Purdue University

Abstract

A Purdue University School of Technology site has established a successful program to formally recognize high school seniors for improved academic performance. Since the inception of the "BreakAway/ Award" in 1993, the marketing effort has increased the profile of Purdue's technology curricula in the region. This paper details the critical factors and decisions involved in creating and implementing such a program.

Background

Purdue University's School of Technology offers its degree programs at a number of sites in Indiana. The Richmond site currently serves about 150 students each semester in a relatively rural, seven-county region. A cooperative arrangement with Indiana University's regional campus, IU East, enables Purdue's students to conveniently obtain support coursework.

While overshadowed locally by IU East, and distant from Purdue's West Lafayette campus, the Richmond site must establish its own Purdue identity in the region. Marketing professionally to busy high school counselors and nearby industry is challenging for a small staff that also processes admissions, registration, financial aid, purchase requisitions, budgets and adjunct contracts.

Although Purdue University technology degrees have been available for over twenty-five years in Richmond, the programs have remained relatively unknown. Local high school graduates routinely overlook nearby higher education; often leaving the area to enroll in similar programs. Non-traditional and underprepared students do not learn of the opportunities to succeed at Purdue's technology site.

To address this challenge, we devised a marketing project with three goals:

- Increase program awareness with high school students, parents, advisors, teachers, administrators and the community.
- Recognize "late expellers," who can succeed in the technology programs.
- Associate the technology programs with serious, but "late excelling" students.

We chose to create a recognition award for high school students. This paper details the award implementation and results.

Award Definition

Many crucial decisions were made at award definition. We chose to recognize one high school senior at each of the region's eighteen high schools. Given current budgets, the award would include no monetary component.

Establishment of award criteria was pivotal. Because there would be no scholarship funds associated with the award, we had few constraints in defining its recipients. We chose to focus on seniors who had demonstrated a significant improvement in their grade point averages over at least the previous two semesters. We also required that they be involved in math and science coursework.

These were generally students who had become serious about learning, but whose overall grade point average probably would not reflect these recent improvements. Such students can excel at a Purdue University technology site, where development coursework can fill in academic gaps. Award criteria would not include admission to Purdue University, or any college for that matter. Our marketing goals did not depend upon the recipients' specific career plans.

After reviewing dozens of potential award titles, we selected: The Break*Away!* Award. We sought to establish an award identity with a name that reflected the selection criterion of accelerated learning. A distinctive font was selected for use with the Award.

Each participating high school would identify an Award contact person and propose its internal selection process for approval by the Purdue site. While we wanted the math and science teachers involved, the designed approval form listed alternate methods.

Once Purdue University had approved its selection process, the high school could nominate its BreakAway! Award candidate. The nomination form summarizes the award criteria and requires a brief explanation of how the individual meets the criteria. Purdue's review and final approval of the nominee holds the award criteria consistent and maintains the Award's credibility.

In seeking a visible means of recognition, we designed an 8"X 10" wooden plaque (Figure 1). It holds a printed and engraved brass plate, as well as a small Purdue medallion cast by students in the technology foundry class. The medallion adds a distinctive look to the plaque, without expense. We were able to limit total cost of each BreakAway/ Award to about twenty dollars.

Initial Award Implementation

We initiated the Award program with an announcement mailing to each of the eighteen high schools in the Richmond site's service region. The materials included a detailed description of the Award criteria and fictional profiles of qualifying recipients. The initial mailings also included the forms associated with approval of the high school's selection process and nomination of a candidate.

Follow up with non-responding schools proved critical. Some simply misplaced the documentation or the awards coordinator had not recognized it as needing set-up activities. The follow up calls also helped delineate the BreakAway/ Award from others on their agenda. The first year of the BreakAway! Award, we approved six high school selection processes. At that point, we ordered plaque materials and engraving, noting there was a minimum quantity on the silk screened brass panels. We followed up with the schools during the spring to ensure they were processing nominations.

As the nominations arrived for the hectic awards ceremony season, we scheduled two to three faculty or staff members to share the presentation privilege. A Purdue presenter typically used one minute of introduction time to succinctly describe Purdue's technology programs and the intent of the BreakAway/ Award. With the plaque, we gave each recipient a personal letter of congratulations, which also explained the Award criteria and the source of the plaque's medallion.

Participation in the BreakAway! Award program has increased each year, as we followed up with the non-participating schools. A candidate meeting the BreakAway! Award criteria is not always available at a participating school. Award credibility supersedes immediate marketing desires, and we give no Award. From the spring of 1993 to 1995, high schools having Purdue-approved selection processes increased from six to all eighteen. Nine BreakAway/ Awards were presented in 1995.

Program Results

The BreakAway! Award has had a variety of results, generally very positive. We have become associated with recognition of the community's high achievers and built relationships with other participating organizations (e.g., local service clubs).

We found that not all the high schools had actual awards ceremonies or allowed a Purdue University representative to make the presentation. For those that did, high school officials usually segregated the BreakAway/ Award with other non-monetary awards. However, this segregation did not appear to detract from the presentation impact. Purdue's presenters generally found the ceremonies to be an enjoyable responsibility.

Typically, the BreakAway/ Award recipients received little if any other academic recognition, given their modest, overall grade point levels. The students were generally surprised and very pleased. One assumes that the late spring award ceremonies are too late to actually affect seniors' career plans. And yet, two Award recipients have enrolled in the local technology programs during the Award's first three years.

As a general example, one recipient had been out of high school recovering from medical difficulties for over a year. Upon returning, his attitude and academic performance had improved dramatically. As a twenty-one-year-old high school senior, he received a Purdue University BreakAway/ Award.

The impact on parents is more difficult to assess. Many parents attend the evening award ceremonies. For technology programs such as Purdue's, these forums can be valuable marketing opportunities. Often the parents have other school-age children, and perhaps the Purdue message is stored for recall later.

It is with the high school counselors and teachers that we found significant improvements. The process of setting up the Award enhanced existing relationships. The annual selection of a candidate required extended discussions among teachers and counselors related to the Award's rather unusual criteria. The overall effect seems to have been to expand our presence beyond the routine visits with guidance counselors. Science and math teachers were working with Purdue University nomination forms. Counselors were asking for clarification on eligibility of specific individuals. Somewhat to our surprise, we found a generally more professional and consistent relationship between ourselves and the participating high schools.

Future Plans

We have plans to improve the effectiveness of the program. One goal for the BreakAway! Award is to increase the number of nominations. This will involve closer contact during each high school's selection process, to prevent inadvertent stalling. As possible and appropriate, we will give award recipients further recognition in the local or high school newspapers.

We would like to consider a monetary award at some point. However, the use of such scholarship funds within the Break*Away!* Award would probably negatively constrain the Award criteria and change its character. A monetary award may work better as a parallel award, perhaps with a similar, but distinctly different, name.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

We learned much in implementing the BreakAway! Award that may assist others. First, plan on investing the time up front to analyze the criteria and the control of the processes. Plan also on spending time with each high school representative to explain the value of the award program to their students. Most high schools have plenty of non-monetary awards to clutter an awards ceremony. Initiate any new award program early in the academic year.

If scholarship funds are not to be part of the award, plan on creating a plaque, medallion or trophy that is attractive, if not impressive. This sends an important message to both the student and those involved in the selection process. Be aware that a monetary component can easily constrain one to students enrolled in specific curricula or schools. A smaller pool of eligible candidates can mean fewer nominees and awards.

Purdue University's BreakAway! Award was largely a profile-raising program and only indirectly a recruitment one. It was one component of an overall marketing strategy. As the Award increased Purdue's profile among the students and parents, we found our relationships with the high school contacts improved. A carefully planned and executed campaign can apparently yield such unexpected benefits,

Acknowledgments

The BreakAway! Award was co-developed by the author and Suzanne Derengowski of Purdue's Statewide Technology site in Richmond. Within her marketing activities, Ms. Derengowski interfaces with the high schools and has coordinated the growth of the BreakAway! Award program. Award presentation support has also been given by Professor David W. Frantz, Mr. Mark T. Hartman, and Ms. Jacqueline Witters Stroh.

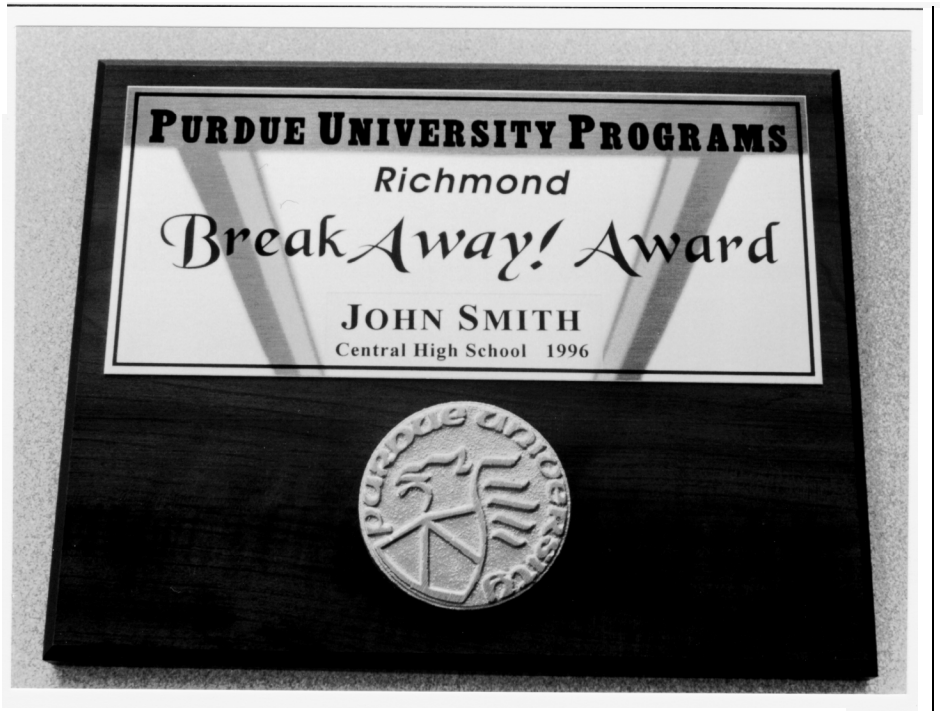

Figure 1 The BreakAway! Award Plaque

Do not go beyond this point

BRIAN A. ALENSKIS

Mr. Alenskis is an Assistant Professor and Site Administrator for Purdue University Programs in Richmond, Indiana. He also serves as Richmond's Mechanical Engineering Technology Program Coordinator. Mr. Alenskis received his Bachelor of Science and his Master of Engineering degrees in Mechanical Engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy NY. He has extensive, industrial, engineering/management experience.