

AC 2008-2912: THE VALUE OF SCAVENGER HUNTS IN THE LIFE OF A FRESHMAN

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The Value of Scavenger Hunts in the Life of a Freshman

Abstract

Students acclimatizing themselves to the university usually find that discovery process to be a self-motivated activity. They wander about finding whatever they happen to be interested in or manage to accidentally encounter. These novices move about the university without anyone providing them any direction in their search. The problem with this method is that it simply becomes an activity that is hit or miss in allowing students to discover what the university really provides in the way of interesting pursuits and helpful means to accomplish one's final focus for career pursuit. Students reflect that when told to go places and find pertinent information about the location or the people who exist there, they comply with the assignment and in many cases find interests that they never imagined existed. By providing insights into locations on campus to visit and investigate, we can direct students with little force or effort. In order to accomplish both the connection to the university and something that will be retained by the students performing the activity, it has become common practice with our freshmen students to provide them with ample chances to participate in Scavenger Hunts across the College of Engineering and the entire campus. Details of these varied Scavenger Hunts, the benefits of the activities, and student reactions to the assignments will be reported.

Introduction

Scavenger hunts provide students with a relatively painless way to discover for themselves what makes up a university. They can be carefully directed to specific sites or allowed to investigate areas that they have only heard about and want to delve into with their increased interest. The scavenger hunt gives the student permission to play detective. They also let the student go, unhindered by the previous presence of parents who needed to monitor everything their child did. Coupling scavenger hunts with presentations, website presence, and the connecting qualities of the individual hunts is beneficial to making students feel that they are truly part of the university. When thinking about providing students with scavenger hunt activities, one must consider the overall benefits to the students. If it is simply an activity that is commonly referred to as "busy" work, students may complete the task only to achieve the grade and nothing more. If the work is to be done with longer reaching consequences, then the activity is well worth doing. It is therefore imperative that that rationale for letting students investigate the university be clearly stated to them. The varieties of scavenger hunts required of students at the freshman level have included the following, but are not limited in any way to:

- In building – College of Engineering
- On campus – specific
- On campus general – as a total project
- On campus – as part of a team

In-Building Hunts

When starting with a simple scavenger hunt that requires students to investigate the college of engineering, the rationale is fairly clear. Students should be able to easily get to places within

their environment. They should be able to access all the important places that may be needed in the future for advising, counseling, and career exploration. Being comfortable with their surroundings makes for a much better existence and allows them to feel a part of that environment. It is important to design the means to incorporate the environment into the life of the incoming student, not simply to expect that they will find their own way. This may be extremely important in the current student population that has been raised by parents who have always been there to protect them. Freshmen who without their parents may feel isolated in their residence halls can be assimilated into the life of the college by simply having them attend club meetings, talk to faculty, and visit rooms less traveled in the college's buildings. It is an assignment, but for the student it gives them permission to do exactly what they want – wander and investigate. This also enables us to direct them to faculty who have open doors and personalities that allow initial interactions between the faculty and student. Many times a student feels intimidated. In this way, we get them into the life of the college; and they get the chance to have fun doing it.

The benefits of the hunts are many. Students roam the engineering building finding laboratories that will be a part of their lives in the years to come, become acquainted with faculty who will educate them, and learn the ins and outs of the majors they have chosen. Expanding the scavenger hunts to the rest of the university takes three forms: sending students to specific locations or individuals, learning about the university as a whole, and performing as a team to divide the university into units and providing others with their impressions of what makes up the university.

On-Campus Specific Hunts

Giving students specific locations to investigate allows the instructor to direct the student's focus to areas that may not be generally thought of as "engineering." An example of this might be having students report on the backstage activities of a university theatrical production. For the mechanical engineer, looking at the design, build, and test process involved in a theater production may draw them into attending plays and reacting to both the activity on stage and the means needed to get that play to opening night. Leading students to participate in extracurricular activities by allowing them to come from their own perspectives is easily accomplished with hunts into different kinds of haunts.

Taking the roads less traveled on campus can also work well with broadening the student's impression of faculty who do not teach in engineering but truly enjoy what engineering is and how it is done. As with the theater, which requires building and design, there are many other areas on campus that draw from the functions of engineering to exist. These might include power plants on campus, water treatment units, cyclotrons, and hazardous waste facilities. Sending students to talk to faculty and staff in these areas may provide strong ammunition for the students in their decisions to continue in engineering.

On-Campus General Hunts

Moving from the specific to the general scavenger hunt at the university gives the instructor the opportunity to make sure that the student looks not just at his or her major but at all those aspects

that will make life at the university both enjoyable and valuable. Most students will never admit to needed vocational or psychological help. They may want to ask, but they will hesitate to confide. One way to start them at least knowing where to go if help is needed is to have them hunt out all those places on campus that they could tell their friends about when the friend needs help. They can always say that they were required to find locations on campus for help with financial problems, sexual preference issues, late night injuries, or places in the library where one can study. The scavenger hunt allows them to be knowledgeable as an information aide not a specific user of the information. Obviously, once they have discovered the information, they are free to use it without having to ask someone else for it.

On-Campus Team Hunts

The last of the scavenger hunts that we use involves the entire class as a team, dividing the campus into sections to reflect the number of students in the class. The students then travel to their sections to find the most interesting sites, people, and history involved in that space. The campus is two square miles so that gives ample room for individual exploration. These reports, usually containing many pictures, provide the class with a look at campus that they would never see if left on their own to investigate the whole university. Presentations then ensue to flesh out the details of the scavenging. Students get a chance to instruct the rest of the class in what they have discovered. Again, they are not required to choose the locations that they talk about, and this allows them to be the reporters without any personal connection to the information, even though they may be excited about what they have found. This aloofness allows for an enormous amount of discovery without the idea that they are really interested in what they have found. Engineers sometimes find it hard to tell people that they really enjoy things outside of engineering.

The Value of the Hunts

The scavenger hunt also provides a means to allow the student to see connections between his or her own college and the areas that seem to sit apart from engineering. Arts and Letters doesn't have a connection until one starts looking closely at the communication that we all do and the need for communication to practice engineering. The connections drawn between courses taken in the college and outside the college will help the student to see the importance of a wide variety of areas and their own major studies. Math becomes vital to the practice of engineering. English is used to communicate. Theater shows a person how to carry him or herself in front of an audience. The student who has ventured away from the engineering building is truly experiencing the totality of the university.

An example of one set of questions that allow students to investigate the university is the following:

Scavenger Hunt - Selective Questions

- A mistake you find in *The State News*
(You define what a mistake is).
- Obtain the following:
a bookmark, plastic bag, or receipt from the bookstore of your choice.

a pamphlet from Olin Health Center.
a leaf from the most prevalent tree on campus.
a bicycle registration form or a copy of one you filled out for your bicycle.
a pamphlet on bicycle security.
a map of bicycle routes on campus.
a ride on someone's special bicycle.

- What is the procedure for reporting sexual harassment?
- Get the name of an MSU driver.
- Who built the Bogue Street Bridge?
- Where is the Red Cedar Yacht Club?
- When were the following buildings built?
 - Ag Hall
 - Dorms (Eastern, Northern, and Western)
 - Administration Building
- Where was the Administration building located before the present one was built?
- Some people say the present Administration building looks the way it does because of the time period in which it was built. Why?
- Where is the largest ceramic sculpture on campus/world?
- Find a number of sculptures on campus. Where are they?
- Where is the original Engineering Building?

Anecdotal Responses

The reactions to the scavenger hunts have been enlightening. Students are quick to follow the instructions and complete the assignment because they know a grade is attached. The interesting thing is that they will comment one-on-one that they found the activity quite fascinating because they never knew that there were labs doing wine and chocolate research. Sent to all reaches of the campus, students dredge the archives for information about the institution that they have chosen to attend. They discover how the university works and who can open doors that seem to be locked to them. In their first weeks on campus they discover more information than most juniors and seniors ever discover. Since the scavenger hunt requires contact with engineering faculty and staff, freshmen students are able to talk to actual engineering personnel, an activity that in the past may have not occurred until two years had passed after entry to the university. The hunt also provides a jumping off point for questions about the university and their role in it. One student after spending a great deal of time collecting information across campus commented, "I really discovered in a short period that what I have always wanted to be is a veterinarian and not an engineer. I got to talk to people (in the veterinary school) who really gave me insights into the program and where I want to go." They need to be happy in the careers that they have chosen. If fine-tuning these students places them in career paths that will make them both successful and happy, the activities have been worthwhile.

Beyond the University

I am sure that there are some who might feel that scavenger hunts are trivial and do not fit into the educational arena. It is interesting, though, that when one looks at the world outside the

university, that scavenger hunts are not seen as the frivolous activities of children. They are meant to be a useful means by which many needs can be met.

Here is an ad from WCF Team Building Programs – Chicago, Illinois

How can you guarantee a great time at your next outing while also meeting the objectives of your boss and company? How do you create lasting value for your team and the organization while also having a relaxing and fun event?

Windy City Fieldhouse (WCF) is the Midwest's largest Team Building and Entertainment Company dedicated to assisting you with your goal to build a high performance team with enthusiastic, motivated and loyal employees. WCF achieves this goal by creating exceptional and memorable interactive events throughout the Chicago land area ranging from Interactive Summer Outings and Amazing Races to Deep Skills Team Building Events. No matter what the occasion, WCF accommodates your every need by matching and customizing its programs to fit your unique mission and objectives while providing you with a hassle-free planning experience.

Windy City Fieldhouse creates, organizes and leads your group on an exciting and creative “Mission Impossible” Scavenger Hunt and/or Amazing Race taking place at locations such as downtown Chicago, Lincoln Park, Navy Pier, suburban resorts, museums or amusement parks. Groups first collaborate to solve clues and then use the clues to reach unique destinations.¹

The above activities all center around scavenger hunts, where business people in teams search for information around a set location. They are given tasks to complete as a team and then required to report on their findings. Team building, information gathering, and fun all rolled into one activity.

The world of education also looks at scavenger hunts as ways to open up students' curiosity to knowledge. Although the following had a grade 7-12 audience, one can see how it can be used within engineering courses to focus students on needed information.

Scavenger Hunts: Searching for Treasure on the Internet!

Internet scavenger hunts are a way for students to practice problem solving, improve their reading and comprehension skills, and learn how to search the Internet.

Scavenger hunts, or treasure hunts, have quickly become one of the most popular tools for teaching students how to access and use the resources and information available on the Internet. There are many reasons for the hunts' rapidly growing popularity. Among them:

- Online scavenger hunts are easy to create and the resulting interactive searches are both fun and informative for students.
- The hunts can be geared to virtually any curriculum area, simultaneously providing students with technological and subject matter knowledge.

- Online scavenger hunts can be used as a whole class activity, as a team activity, or as a means of providing individual students with review or challenge activities.
- Scavenger hunts can be as simple or involved as circumstances dictate. Younger students may be provided with only a few questions, along with the links or URLs necessary for finding the answers, while older students may be given only a broad topic and asked to find their own sources for obtaining necessary information.²

And even in those areas outside the borders of our classrooms, engineering focused scavenger hunts play an active role. Here is one advertisement from the 2006 Watson Adventures LLC.

JANUARY SCAVENGER HUNTS

NEW! The Air & Space Race Scavenger Hunt at the New Air & Space Museum

Saturday, January 27, 2 to 4:30 p.m.

Few museums are as jaw-dropping as the new branch of the [National Air and Space Museum](#) near Dulles Airport. Opened in 2003, the giant hangar-like space boasts more than 200 planes, helicopters, gliders, and space vehicles, including a full-size Concorde, a full-size [Space Shuttle](#), a Boeing-707, a scary-cool [Blackbird](#) jet (like something out of a Batman movie), and the [Enola Gay](#), which dropped the first A-bomb on Hiroshima. But even if you aren't an aviation fan, you'll discover plenty of objects to amuse and fascinate you, such an airman's wacky "party suit," the original spaceship from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, kitschy Lindbergh and space memorabilia, a true-to-life scene of peasants attacking a balloon (they thought it was a monster), and an ingenious CIA transmitter designed to resemble dog poop. Special debut price: \$15 per person.³

Conclusions

Scavenger hunts while sounding like they may be focused only on frivolous fun have an important bearing on the lives of both incoming and seasoned undergraduates. If experienced early in the undergraduate career, they can open up a myriad of opportunities to doors that might never be opened, especially by engineers. They can direct students to departments that will help them with everything from studying to being on the fencing team. They can also be useful to upper level undergraduates who have hibernated in the engineering confines and need to be given the opportunity to see what the university offers before they graduate. In that way perhaps they, too, will see the world as a place offering a great many more positive attributes than they thought. Students report that these scavenger hunts have provided them with an opportunity to see the university with different eyes. They have opened up to activities that they never thought to pursue on campus. These include cultural activities, volunteer functions, and adventures in pursuing new and exciting learning.

References

1 http://www.windycityfieldhouse.com/team_building/Mission_Impossible_Scavenger_Hunts.html

2 <http://www.antgrasshopper.com/scavenger-hunts.htm>

3 <http://www.watsonadventures.com/>

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- 3 http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-news/?i=52265;_hbguid=a7b24e7b-7d3a-4acb-aedf-2e59c0af2a14&d=top-news