

Enticing high school students to study business: one college's efforts

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ABSTRACT

Higher enrollments mean more funding for higher education, as the new model for funding rests on tuition rather than state funding. This paper describes a format for bringing relatively small groups of high school students to campus for an educational workshop, which also serves as a recruiting event. Connecting high school students with college faculty is an effective method to get them interested in a post-secondary education. Research shows that campus events like those described in this paper, rather than field recruiting and college fairs, is especially meaningful for first generation college students. In this case, enrollments increased.

Keywords: business education, higher education funding, recruiting, first generation students



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INTRODUCTION

Student recruiting has become a part of faculty life, much like teaching, research and service. The new model of higher education funding is now driven by tuition dollars rather than state taxpayer aid. Hence, higher enrollments mean more campus money. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the formulation and implementation of a successful partnership between local high schools in southeast Louisiana and the College of Business Administration at Nicholls State University. Small groups of high school students visit campus for an educational workshop, which also serves as a recruiting event. Students receive instruction in the five functional areas of business, which also provides them with useful life skills, over the course of a morning. Thus, this paper offers strategic advice to small regional business schools who are considering their own recruiting efforts to supplement their university's process. In uncertain budgetary times, events such as that described are an ideal way to showcase to potential students what a college has to offer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Field recruiting and college fairs are often the first point of contact many colleges utilize when attracting applicants; reaching out to students in person at high school events is a key part of the process. Admissions representatives visit high schools armed with information; however, this approach can sometimes feel clinical and impersonal. Research has shown that "brochures and college fairs are no longer sufficient means of recruiting" (Johnston, 2010). Furthermore, research has shown that these field visits favor those who attend schools (1) that are private, (2) where family income is high and (3) where students are white (Jaschik, 2018). Even when pandering to millennials and post-millennials, emails, websites and online application portals are not nearly as effective as a personal source of information. "Using a more individualized approach has proven to be effective for many schools" (Kuras 1997). Accordingly, "one surefire way for a university . . . to reach a prospective student is to host him or her on campus" (Johnston, 2010). These "on campus visits are an important part of recruitment and may be particularly important for disadvantaged students" (Jaschik, 2018). Furthermore, students should interact with a university's faculty and staff when visiting campus. Surprisingly, a survey of students found that these on campus contacts to be highly influential during the recruiting process, "ranked up with mother and father" (Johnston, 2010). After all, faculty and staff will be the people a student interacts with on campus and are ultimately responsible for the student's college experience – good or bad – not recruiters or admissions specialists.

This is especially true for first generation college students. As applicants, they pose a unique set of hurdles for universities: "some have parents who support their plans for higher education; others are under family pressure to enter the workforce" (College Find Me, 2016). Most suffer from a basic lack of knowledge about college such as the application process and academic procedures. Some are embarrassed about their backgrounds and unwilling to ask questions. Connecting faculty (some of whom may have been first generation students) with these applicants via their high school teachers is an effective method to get this group interested in post-secondary education. Thus, effective outreach includes on-campus workshops and mentorships (Fusch, 2011). "Bring them to campus early!" (Doubleday, 2013).

LOUISIANA'S FUNDING CHALLENGE

Despite blessed with a bounty of natural resources, Louisiana has faced multiple budget crises over the last decade. The state's economy is tied to the price of oil, and diversification has been difficult. Louisiana has always lagged behind the Southern Regional Educational Board funding average for each full-time university and community college student. This became particularly evident between 2008 and 2017 when state aid for higher education in Louisiana dropped \$1 billion (WWL, 2017).

Most of the higher education cuts were made during the administration of former Gov. Bobby Jindal, who reduced income and sales taxes within months of taking office. Upon his ill-fated run for President, Jindal became a disciple of Grover Norquist, the anti-tax guru. When the national recession hit and oil prices tanked, Louisiana lost about \$1 billion in annual revenue. Jindal promised to "oppose and veto all efforts to increase taxes," and then slashed aid to higher education and health care for the poor in order to balance the state's budget (Bridges, 2015). Universities and colleges had no choice but to increase tuition to "pay faculty and offset rising mandated costs for pensions and other expenses that are not funded by the state" (Heffker, 2019). Pre-2008, the state funded about 70 percent of universities' budgets. Afterward, the state picked up the tab for 30% (Gluckman, 2017).

After Jindal left office, the state's colleges and universities no longer endured cuts to their operating budgets, and those in higher education uttered a collective sigh of relief. Nonetheless, while other states have increased their appropriations over the last five years, Louisiana still lags behind in educational funding, and the tuition increases remain (Gluckman, 2017).

The Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) was first instituted in 1989. It is the state's scholarship program and available without regard to financial need. Graduating high school seniors with a 2.5 GPA and ACT score of 20 are eligible for 4 years of tuition at one of the state's public colleges or universities. On average, the state spends about \$200 million per year on the program and serves close to 51,000 students. The TOPS program also placed a financial burden on the state because, until recently, award amounts were tied to tuition (Gluckman, 2017). As TOPS awards became fixed and tuition grew, the need for students and their families to make up the difference also grew. According to Louisiana's Department of Education, the number of high school seniors completing the federal student aid application has skyrocketed; Louisiana now leads the nation for FAFSA completion (NOLA, 2018).

Unfortunately, college enrollment in Louisiana has also lagged behind other states. After the recession, enrollment in public higher education in Louisiana has grown 1.3 percent, while the nation has clocked an 8.5 percent gain. Other states - especially those along the Gulf Coast - have recruited Louisiana students, offering full-ride scholarships or discounted tuition (State Higher Education Executive Officers report, 2017).

Thus, in a time of decreased funding and increased competition, recruiting has become an increasingly critical part of faculty's role in higher education, especially in Louisiana.

BACKGROUND OF INSTITUTION

Nicholls State University, located in Thibodaux, La., is a comprehensive regional university serving a diverse population of 6,500 students – its demographic makeup is 70% Caucasian, 18% African American, and the remaining 12% a mixture of different cultures and races. However, over 60% are first generation college students. The 287-acre Thibodaux

campus, domiciled within Lafourche Parish, is approximately 50 miles west of New Orleans, and is close to the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico and Louisiana's wetlands.

The Nicholls State University College of Business Administration is AACSB-accredited and offers degrees in accounting, finance, computer information systems, marketing, management and business administration. The College includes two graduate programs for those interested in pursuing an MBA degree.

THE PROGRAM

The Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) requires high school students to choose one of two paths for their instruction: college preparatory or direct into industry. Regardless of the path, students must spend some time off campus in a learning activity related to their eventual entry into the workforce. Some schools allow time spent on a part-time job to satisfy this requirement; other schools have their students shadow someone in their chosen field. However, this proves to be time consuming and quite burdensome upon already overworked high school instructors.

The High School Business Workshop presented by the Nicholls College of Business Administration was developed in partnership with Hahnville High School and the St. Charles Parish Business Advisory Board, of which a tenured professor of the college is a member. Students are exposed to all areas of business over the course of a morning to satisfy the DOE's requirement and provide them with useful life skills. In February 2016, 17 students from Hahnville High School were guests of the College of Business. All had expressed an interest in business, with the possibility of furthering their educations at the collegiate level. The students received instruction in the five functional areas of business. Local media was alerted as were other high schools in the area. The students loved being on campus and spending time with some of the College's finest faculty members. The event was an ideal way to showcase to potential students what the College of Business at Nicholls has to offer. A recruiting effort was born!

Thereafter, business teachers from public high schools were approached to gauge their level of interest. Schools no more than an hour's drive away within the following parishes were contacted: Ascension, Lafourche, St. Charles, St. James, St. Mary and Terrebonne. In particular, students from St. James and St. Mary were targeted, as the university had experienced a decrease in enrollment from those areas over the past few years. High schools interested in attending secure permission from their respective principals, choose a date to attend, and arrange transportation via school bus to and from the Nicholls campus. The program is offered only on Fridays as it is the least populated time on campus, allowing for classroom availability. The workshop can accommodate up to 40 students, plus any faculty / chaperones. Small groups from one school are combined with small groups from others. The workshop series begins no later than 9 am and the last session concludes by 12:15 pm. The agenda provides time for students to use the restroom and move through the business building. Total time on campus is about four hours.

Upon email confirmation of a visit, the high school receives a sample lunch menu, a typical schedule for the workshop, and a copy of the parental consent form (any minor must provide a written, signed consent form from their parent or guardian to take the post workshop survey). Students can attend the program even if they do not have the consent form (they just will not take the survey).

Students receive a welcome from the Dean of the Business School upon arrival, along with information about its programs, scholarships and degrees. A member of the university's admissions office offers a short presentation to the group. Each student receives "swag" - a drawstring backpack containing items bearing the university's logo including cups, temporary tattoos, pens and notepads. Participants also receive a pamphlet with information personalized to their high school: distance to campus from their high school, number of alumni attending Nicholls, cost of attending Nicholls versus other schools in the region, location of the College's website, and various social media channels.

A faculty member from each discipline constructs a short 25-minute presentation. Students are then broken up into small groups and then rotate through the following presentations:

- Finance - Personal Finance: Students are introduced to budgeting and the role it plays in financial independence, regardless of income level. The effect of the time value of money helps to clarify the importance of saving.
- Marketing – Marketing Yourself to Employers: Students learn how to use the 4Ps of marketing to secure a good job. Students study the basic components of a marketing plan and create a personal marketing plan.
- Management – Making Good First Impressions: A good first impression is just as important as a resume and job interview. Students learn the basic and necessary skills to make a first impression both positive and lasting.
- Accounting – Income Tax Preparation: Students get a hands-on review of the Federal Income Tax 1040 EZ form.
- Computer Information Systems – Computer Networking Fundamentals: This workshop covers the basics of computer networking. Faculty teach how data moves from one computer to another via the game "Battleship."

At the end of the program, each participant receives a certificate of completion suitable for framing. Students and faculty/chaperones then complete a short survey about their experience. The sole purpose of the survey is for internal review and continuous improvement of the overall workshop experience, as well as specific workshops sessions. The University's Human Subjects Internal Review Board requires minors provide a written, signed consent form from their parent or guardian to take the survey. Even with a written signed consent form, any person's participation is voluntary and they can choose not to answer any specific question(s) on the survey.

Most schools then have lunch on campus in the university's cafeteria, offering a buffet style, all you can eat lunch format. By providing a copy of their school or school district's tax exemption certificate, the cost of dining is approximately \$6 per person.

Faculty participation from the College of Business is voluntary. This teaching assignment is out of load and gratis; each faculty member may include it in their annual performance review as part of their service to the college. Faculty within each department rotate so as no one individual makes their discipline specific presentation every time. Individuals from College of Business student groups help guide the high school students from classroom to classroom and aid with any hands-on activities.

STATISTICS

Overall, the university increased its annual enrollment from the targeted parishes by 56%; however, we cannot attribute the increase to the workshops. Table 1 (Appendix) includes the changes per parish.

However, the percentage changes in freshman enrollment for the majors offered by the College of Business are encouraging and are found in Table 2 (Appendix). Most majors saw an increase in enrollment from the specific parishes. The business administration and management degrees saw a positive trend from all parishes observed. Geographically, Terrebonne Parish is the closest to Lafourche Parish; several high schools in Terrebonne visited more than once in the time surveyed and an increase in enrollment was observed across the board in all disciplines.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

We tried various things that flopped; thus, let the following serve as areas to avoid:

- Structured dates – College of Business faculty chose dates on the academic calendar to present the workshops. These dates were then offered to the high school instructors. Interest was tepid. The high school faculty preferred selecting their own date to visit. If the College presenters were available, the workshop was booked.
- Faculty fatigue – Other schools interested in implementing such a recruiting event should be aware that faculty will experience fatigue if workshops occur every week. No more than one workshop every two or three weeks should be scheduled. Furthermore, it is also suggested that faculty within each department rotate so no one individual makes their discipline specific presentation every time.
- Workshops with complex topics – While the workshops primarily serve as a recruiting tool, it is recognized that some of the high student school attendees may never attend college; hence, the workshop should provide these students with basic skills they can apply in the workforce. Unfortunately, some business topics can go from simple to complex in nanoseconds. Our presentation of sales taxes did not go over well with our guests, and this topic was never repeated.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

As an epilogue to our first 2 years of workshops, the following are recent developments:

- Discipline specific workshops– One high school was interested in spending a morning exploring the accounting field. A very small group of approximately 10 students and 1 chaperone attended. Accounting faculty and members of Beta Alpha Psi (the honor society for accounting, finance and CIS students) presented information on the College's accounting program, job opportunities in the field, personal and corporate income taxes, and the CPA exam. It was well received and the high school instructor soon returned with another group of students.
- Grant money - Beginning with the spring 2019 semester, the College of Business partnered with the Admissions Office at Nicholls State University. A generous grant from the Entergy Louisiana Corporation aimed at exposing low income, potential first-generation students to a college education offered free transportation in a chartered bus to and from each high school. The grant funds also covered the meal costs in the

university's cafeteria for those attending the workshop – students, chaperones, and workshop presenters. A member of the Nicholls Admissions Office accompanies the group on the bus ride to campus, using the time to present admissions information. Thus, allowing the workshop presenters more time with each group, something requested by all.

- The idea spreads- The workshop method began to catch on across campus as not all students may be interested in a career in business. The Nicholls Art department jumped on board and a joint effort was employed spring 2019 when a group from Assumption High School shared the ride to campus.
- The coronavirus pandemic led to an abrupt halt to the program. All elementary, middle and high school instruction shifted to distance learning, as did universities in the state of Louisiana, effective March 16, 2020. At the time, College of Business faculty collectively decided it was best not to offer the workshops online, as the experience of visiting the campus would be lost.

CONCLUSION

In February 2016, an idea to recruit students to study business in college was born at a small regional university: bring high school students to campus for an educational workshop, taught by faculty members from the university's college of business. Schools no more than an hour's drive away were targeted. At the end of the program, each participant receives a certificate of completion and have lunch on campus. Total time on campus is about 4 hours. The effort paid off as an increase in enrollment occurred. As we navigate the future, it is unknown when and how the program will resume.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Changes in Average Fall Enrollment, Freshman Class, Nicholls State University

Parish	Average Annual Fall Enrollment, 2012-2017	Fall Student Enrollment, 2018	Percentage Change
Ascension	6.33	11	+73%
Terrebonne	38.83	61	+57%
Lafourche	41.00	59	+44%
St. Charles	6.50	7	+8.0%
St. James	4.67	7	+50%
St. Mary	13.67	28	+105%

Table 2: Percentage Change in Freshman Class Enrollment by College of Business Major*

Parish	BSAD + MNGT	ACCT	FINC	CIS	MKTG
Ascension	+118%	+300%	+20%	-100%	-100%
Terrebonne	+40%	+10%	+327%	+188%	+20%
Lafourche	+25%	+35%	+199%	+144%	-25%
St. Charles	+43%	-25%	-100%	-100%	+52%
St. James	+67%	-40%	-100%	+506%	+203%
St. Mary	+53%	+172%	+1076%	-7.8%	+500%

*Percentage changes calculated by comparing the average annual enrollment for each major, 2012-2017 to the annual enrollment, 2018.

