Notes on Recruiting Surveying Students

by
Carlton Brown[†] & Knud E. Hermansen[††]

For several years, the Surveying Engineering Technology program at the University of Maine has been trying various recruiting methods with different levels of success. This article will discuss what has worked and what has not.

Recruiting for the surveying program has three objectives: 1) Make high school students aware of careers in surveying, 2) appeal to the students' curiosity and interest so the high school student will investigate surveying careers, and 3) convince high school students to come to the University of Maine to begin their career in surveying.

Mass Mailings to High Schools - The program has tried mass mailings to New England high schools. Brochures and letters explaining surveying and the surveying program have been sent to all New England high schools. Generally, these communications are marginally effective. Despite the communications touting the virtues of surveying and a surveying education, guidance counselors seem to resist actively disseminating the information to students at the high school. Counselors take a passive approach to counseling students. More often then not, the guidance counselors file the communications in binders or file cabinets, letting the students seek the information based on student curiosity. If an interest or curiosity in surveying can be developed in a student, guidance counselors are helpful in directing students to the location of the filed information.

More success has been realized by sending information and communications directly to mathematics and science teachers in the high school. Math and science teachers appear to take a more active approach with the correspondence and usually disseminate the information directly to their students in the class. It is presumed that they do so from a lack of storage and to show students that math and science are relevant to college studies that result in rewarding careers.

Visiting High Schools - High school visits by faculty achieve some success but at a great cost. As a general rule, it seems that presentations must be made to 100 students to sufficiently arouse the curiosity of one student so they will apply for the surveying program.[1] Accordingly, this method may not provide an optimum return for the gasoline, mileage, and time invested by a faculty member. If high schools are visited, the best return is to speak to advanced placement (AP) mathematics and science classes. Students taking math and science AP classes are able and willing to take on the academic challenges of engineering or surveying education.

Reputation and Goodwill - Surveys of first year students indicate a very effective source of recruitment is family, friends, and alumni of the program. As a consequence, a

[1] Our appreciation is extended to Dr. Jim Crossfield, P.L.S. for first pointing out the high disparity between contacts and recruitment.

significant part of the surveying student population has a parent, relative, friend, or acquaintance that is working in the surveying profession. The parents, relative, friend, or acquaintances have had the opportunity to do one-on-one recruiting and are successful in arousing the student's curiosity so they will consider a career in the surveying profession. As a result, communications with the surveying profession and program alumni reap benefits when recruiting for the program. Similar to business marketing, word of mouth is a most effective means of marketing. It follows that the longer a surveying program is operating, the more alumni there are to spread the word resulting in a greater number of applications to a program. The key is to keep the alumni and surveyors informed about the surveying program.

Open House & Campus Visits - Another effective source for recruiting is open houses held on campuses. High school students and family often attend scheduled open houses on campus. Effective recruiting requires that knowledgeable faculty attend the open house and seek out students searching for a career field. Simply having a university representative at the open house may make students aware of the educational opportunities in surveying but does not usually provide the testimonial that will arouse the student's curiosity or interest in surveying as a career. It follows that an active approach must be taken by faculty to attend the open house to seek out parents and prospective students and talk to them about surveying rather than take a passive approach of having brochures available for pick up by the students.

Web Site - Last but not least is the web as a source of effective recruiting. A significant portion of students indicated on the first year survey that they got information about the surveying program and surveying profession by surfing the web. In this age, all high school students are familiar with the web and are experts at surfing the web for information. Experience suggests that students are drawn to the profession by surveying pictures or descriptions of fun activities, salary comparisons, and exciting working conditions. Accordingly, the picture of a surveyor riding an ATV with a mounted GPS receiver gathering data can be more effective at recruiting students to surveying than the picture of a student peering at a computer screen. The student that googles "outdoor," "career," or similar words should register a hit on the surveying web site.

Contents of Communication - Communicating with the prospective student is only part of the recruiting equation. The contents of the communication are extremely important and can multiply or diminish the effectiveness of the objective to arouse the curiosity of the prospective student. One size does not fit all.

Informal surveys of practicing surveyors and students indicate surveyors or those that want to be surveyors enjoy outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing, kayaking, camping, riding ATVs and snowmobiling. The fact that surveying allows the practitioner to do outdoor activities while surveying appears to be a great attraction for students.

Students also want to be able to have a career while living in certain areas. Some may want to work in a rural environment while others may want to work in a metropolitan

area. Still other students may want to return to their hometown or go to some other part of the country. Accordingly, communications should emphasize this flexibility about nationwide opportunities available in the surveying profession and list areas where graduates of the program work.

Many current surveyors are amazed that surveying pay can be an enticement to pursue the surveying profession. While surveying graduates often lag behind starting salaries of some other engineering majors, starting salaries for surveyors exceed (in some cases significantly) the starting salary of most college graduates. Consider the fact that the average salary of a 2007 surveying graduate was $48,000 a year while graduates with degrees in education, liberal arts, social work, and forestry, to mention just a few, all averaged starting salaries less than $40,000 a year. Furthermore, the salary of surveying graduates throughout their professional career more often than not continued to surpass their college classmates who graduated with other degrees and pursued other careers.

Consequently, information provided by the program to prospective high school students has emphasized the opportunity to work outdoors; employment opportunities across the United States; and pay — in that order.

Focused content can be employed where the communications are focused on a particular population. For example, communications sent to mathematics and science teachers emphasize the fact that mathematics and science form the backbone of many surveying tasks (e.g., GPS, adjustment computations). Communications to parents emphasize the availability of work and pay. Communications emphasizing historical research have been sent to history teachers, while CAD skills are emphasized in communications sent to art teachers.

We are always interested in recruiting ideas so please don’t hesitate to share them with the authors.

† Carlton Brown is an assistant professor in the Surveying Engineering Technology program at the University of Maine. Carlton.Brown@umit.maine.edu
†† Knud Hermansen is a professor in the Surveying Engineering Technology program and the Construction Management Technology program at the University of Maine. Knud.Hermansen@umit.maine.edu