

Recruiting Students at Every Level

By Victor F. Brown

Today, especially in North America, many Adventist church schools, academies, and colleges are asking themselves, "Where have all the students gone?"

Despite enrollment declines, the prospects can be better than they imagined. With hard work and focus, most schools can grow their enrollments.

Most colleges and many academies employ full-time recruiters, and some elementary schools have recruitment committees, all trying to stabilize or increase the size of their student body. The hard truth is that, other than endowments, the most significant way to maintain or improve quality is to maintain or grow the enrollment. This article will discuss some recruiting principles that can be applied from the elementary-through the college level.

The most fundamental question for every recruitment program is this: Who and where are our markets? In the U.S., the primary

market for our elementary schools has historically been Adventists from local churches. Academies target their conference elementary schools and churches. Colleges have traditionally targeted churches and academies throughout their union conference. For a variety of reasons, these historic constituencies are not sustaining many of our institutions. As a result, schools must work their traditional markets more effectively and expand their market territories.

For the elementary level, this usually means working harder to find and attract children from local churches. Some elementary schools have increased their enrollments by recruiting non-Adventist students whose parents are interested in private Christian education and a safer environment for their children. Day academies can do the same.

Boarding academies will have a more difficult time recruiting non-members into a dorm lifestyle. They must develop strategies to attract and serve Adventist students in public schools within their conference, as well as others from outside their territory. An academy I worked at in the 1980s drew a significant number of students from several conferences to the north and the south of the school. Without these students, the academy would have had difficulty offering a quality program.

Some academies have also had success recruiting international students (both Adventist and non-Adventist). While still primarily union institutions, colleges are increasingly attracting a regional and national (in some cases international) clientele. A few have been successful recruiting non-church members.

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This market expansion has been controversial. Colleges have struggled to balance the urge to recruit every interested student and the need to not be “sheep stealers.” I believe the market expansion has resulted from the colleges’ desire to maintain enrollments and the market itself. Increasingly, the idea of a “home college” is fading. After years of territorialism, the colleges’ and some academies’ role has become less “border guard” and more “cooperator” as they seek to serve a wider field. However, expanding the market continues to be a challenge. The majority of the enrollment at every four-year Adventist college in the North American Division comes from within its traditional territory.¹

After the school has identified its target markets, it must find ways to serve them. The common denominator of every level of education is the local church. The most easily recruited students come from families that attend church regularly. For this reason, the pastor and local church leaders are critical partners in the recruitment team. A good recruitment program must include strategies to serve and work with the local church.

Academies and colleges also need to serve and attract students from the next lower educational level. A good relationship between each institution and its “feeder” schools is fundamental to success. A lot of creative time and energy should be spent building bridges between the faculty and church administration, and of course, students and their families. Service to the churches, feeder schools, and prospective families is essential for successful recruiting.

Here are some suggestions for bridge-building between educational levels: Elementary schools can host “Home Schooler” days or nights, maintain active parent-teacher organizations, and invite college and academy teachers to serve as in-service presenters and science fair judges. Academy and college administrators should encourage their teachers to actively seek out opportunities to be of assistance to feeder schools (through help lines, discussing anticipated changes in entrance requirements, teaching special units, etc.). Academies and colleges can host youth rallies and festivals (music, athletics, prayer, academics) in addition to the usual academy or college days. The more events when you can get students and their families on your campus, the stronger bridges you will build with your feeder schools.

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The La Sierra University booth at the General Conference Session in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in the summer of 2000.

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Types of Recruitment

Recruiting can be separated into two general areas. The first is indirect recruitment, most often referred to as public relations (PR). PR involves utilizing the school’s performing groups, newsletters, and articles in the local press and union paper. Small traveling groups of students who have musical training and/or are good up front extend the recruitment program and budget. These groups fill many of the programming needs of your constituency while providing excellent PR. Peer-to-peer is often the most effective form of recruitment!

PR also includes the following, often-overlooked areas:

- The reputation of your teachers. Look for ways to let your constituency know about the “star” teachers on your campus.
- The user-friendliness of your finance and records offices. This can make or break your best enrollment efforts.
- The cleanliness and overall appearance of your campus and its buildings. These make an up-front statement about the value and worth of your school.

Direct Recruitment

The second general area is direct recruitment of prospective students and their families. While it seems obvious that, on the elementary level, contacts with parents are critical to the recruitment process, it is just as important to include them at the academy and

college levels. Working with the family not only makes recruitment more effective, but also attracts siblings, cousins, and family friends into the recruitment pool!

When it comes to directly recruiting students/families, what strategies are the most effective? The following principles will help you evaluate any recruitment idea:

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Face to Face Is Best

Research and experience have shown that the more personal the strategy, the more effective the persuasion.² This means two things:

- Go where the people are, and
- Find reasons to get them to visit your campus.

Going where the people are means visiting homes, churches, rallies, camps, and other places where students and their families might be found. If people from your school can participate in the programming for any of these events, that's even better.

I've found that nearly 50 percent of prospects who visit a campus will enroll there. So nothing is more important than a campus visit! I often liken the campus visit to trying on a pair of shoes. If the customer likes the way she looks in the shoes and they fit; it's a sale. Likewise, if the campus is a good fit and the student feels she can be successful, it's a deal.

Plan campus visits carefully, paying close attention to details. Remember that the visitors are your guests.

After face-to-face contacts, the next most effective methods of communicating with prospects are by telephone and E-mail. The Internet is revolutionizing communication possibilities. Every institution should have a Web site and strive to continually update it, making it as user-friendly as possible. E-mail has clearly eclipsed "snail mail" and even the telephone as the preferred method of communication for students. E-mail frees the recruiter and the prospect from the time constraints of using the telephone or postal system. We need to find creative uses for this medium.

Personalized letters, mass mailings, and general advertising, while helpful, are not as effective as the personal touch. Depending on budget and geographical limitations, your recruitment strategies

Victor Brown, author of this article, chats with potential students about enrolling at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington.

Some elementary schools have increased their enrollments by recruiting non-Adventist students whose parents are interested in private Christian education and a safer environment for their children.

should mix the above methods, with emphasis on the personal.

Repeated Contact Makes the Sale

The second principle is that repeated contact makes the sale. No matter how you dazzle prospective students with snazzy promotions and campus visits, they're not part of your student body until they're sitting in the classroom. When planning recruitment activities, be sure to include events that move the student from a prospect to an enrollee.

Consider the following scenario. You meet a prospective academy student at a youth rally in the fall of her 8th-grade year. While visiting with her, you trade names, addresses, telephone numbers, and E-mail addresses. The next week, you send her an acknowledgment of your contact and an information packet in case she didn't get one

at the rally. (I'm always impressed at how many students say they decided on a school because they received that institution's information first, so get your packet out quickly.) If she has an interest in sports, music, or a specific academic area, give her name to that department so they can contact her, too.

Later in the school year, invite her to a special group event or just have her and her family visit the campus. In the late spring or summer, offer to help her pre-register and take steps to clear her financially in person, by phone, or on the Internet.

In the month or two before school starts, contact her one last time. What are her plans? Does she have any last questions or obstacles to enrollment? Families and students need to be sold and resold.

They need multiple contacts from the school.

Grow Your Pool

The third principle involves building as large a prospective student pool as possible. Devise ways to evaluate the interest level of each prospect in your recruitment list. Maximize your impact by spending the most time in the areas with the greatest number of promising prospects.

Growing Your Enrollment Pool—Wisely

While adding a lot of students may seem like a terrific idea for solving your school's financial woes, any plan to increase enrollment has its challenges. Be sure that you have a master plan and strategic planning process to help you anticipate and plan for the changes that will come with a larger student body. Here are some questions you will need to ask:

- What size do we want our school to be? What is the optimal number of students we would want to enroll?
- What kind of students do we want to recruit? Will we focus mainly on Adventist students, or seek to attract a large number of non-Adventists?
- What will be the ratio of residential to non-residential students?
- How many students can our facilities currently accommodate? (With a larger student body, you may need to add buildings and upgrade parking areas and access roads. You will also need more supplies and equipment, generate more trash, use more electricity and water, and may have to upgrade waste disposal and heating/air conditioning capabilities.)
- Will adding students require us to adjust our curricular offerings, and to add staff, faculty, chaplains, deans, counselors, and student support services? Will we be able to find the quality employees we need to accommodate the extra load?
- What measures will we need to take to streamline registration procedures and to process the additional paperwork generated by a larger enrollment?
- What about the scheduling of classes and the extra load imposed on teachers by larger classes and more students to advise?
- How will the fee schedule be affected by an influx of students? Will the students we recruit have difficulty paying for their education? Will they need expensive remedial courses?
- How will we arrange for employment and service/outreach opportunities for a larger student body?
- What steps will we need to take to provide for the spiritual needs of a larger number of students and staff?
- Will adding students require the purchase of expensive equipment and investment in high-cost programs such as music and computer science?
- How will a larger student body affect policies and planning for the institution?
- Will the increase in enrollment affect government and church accreditation?

By developing a master plan that considers these and other relevant areas, you will be able to grow your enrollment wisely, strengthening your financial position and preparing more students for service on this earth and for eternity.

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The most easily recruited students come from families that attend church regularly.

Good recruiting also involves knowing the demographic profile of the current student body. Where do they come from? Do they know of other prospects back home? Are they satisfied with their experience at the school? Retention will be addressed in another article, but it, too, is vital to enrollment success.

Designing Your Sales Pitch

Value versus cost is the fourth principle. Today, the most common reason given for not choosing Adventist education at all levels is the cost. School personnel must expect to hear this objection and have good answers. Indeed, it is a sacrifice for many families to send their children to private school. For others, it isn't a sacrifice, but they are not convinced that the educational quality justifies the cost. We need to underscore the temporal and eternal value of a Christian education. While the eternal value is all-important, this

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Research and experience have shown the importance of home visits in recruiting new students.

doesn't mean we should put less emphasis on academics. On the contrary, this should inspire us to high standards. From elementary to college level, we should recognize and honor the sacrifice involved in sending students to our schools.

Think about the levels of service and excellence our world has come to expect and apply this to your school. Service finds its deepest meaning in the church, and our church schools should set the standard in the service industry. God's promise in Deuteronomy 28:13 applies to all of our schools. To be the head and not the tail, to be a leader not a follower, is both a promise and a challenge!

If you are just starting a recruitment program, on the elementary or academy level, contact the nearest Adventist college recruitment office and ask for ideas and guidance, I am sure they will be happy to help.

Conclusion

Adventist education is growing, even though some schools are facing difficult times. During the past 20 years that I have been involved in recruiting students on both the academy and university levels, I am overwhelmed by the many times God has used me to make a difference. In the rush for enrollment numbers, it is too easy to forget the individual and the impact Christian education can make.

I think about a phone conversation I had with Bridget a few years ago. She had decided to come to the school where I worked, but was having second thoughts about the cost and distance from home. As we talked about God's leading in her life, she decided to take the risk and come. That same year, a young music teacher moved to town to teach at the academy. Near the end of Bridget's nursing program, she and the teacher began to date and eventually married. Today, they are serving together at a boarding academy, making a difference in countless more lives. Bridget has often re-

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mind me of the importance of that phone call when she was in the valley of decision. Recruiting at every level is ministry and life-changing work, both for the recruiter and the recruited! ✍

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2. Michael E. Cafferky, *Let Your Customers Do the Talking* (Baltimore, Md.: Upstart Publishing, 1996), p. 2.

For Additional Reading:

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