RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLS TO PROMOTE AN INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION MASTER OF SCIENCE PROGRAM

Jo L. Egelund, Lecturer
Agricultural Systems Technology & Education Department
Utah State University

Weldon S. Sleight, Associate Dean
College of Agriculture
Utah State University

Bruce E. Miller, Assistant Professor
Gary S. Straquadine, Associate Professor
Agricultural Systems Technology & Education Department
Utah State University

Abstract

The Agricultural Systems Technology and Education (ASTE) Department, at Utah State University (USU), offers a Master of Science degree for International Agricultural Extension Specialists with an administration emphasis. This degree option prepares students for administrative positions in international agriculture; however, a recruitment and retention strategy had not been designed or implemented. The goal of this project was to develop and implement a strategic plan to enhance the International Agricultural Extension Specialist option. The following recruitment and retention tools were developed: 1. a recruitment strategy; 2. a student and country information guide; a student organization; an ASTE student data base; and 5. promotional recruitment materials: a brochure outlining requirements, a mailing list of international student sponsors, a newsletter for current students and alumni.

The strategic plan constitutes the beginning of a structured recruitment and retention strategy. However, these materials and the overall strategy must be monitored, evaluated, revised, and marketed.

Introduction

The Department of Agricultural Systems Technology and Education (ASTE), at Utah State University (USU), offers a Master of Science degree for International Agricultural Extension Specialists with an emphasis in administration. This degree option prepares students for administrative positions in international agriculture. It requires a technical emphasis supplemented with optional administrative courses. Well-educated agricultural research scientists in developing countries are routinely transferred from research assignments to administrative positions. They are required to perform management roles with little preparation. The training of an agricultural research scientist rarely includes courses related to managing people; planning, implementing, evaluating and/or being accountable for programs to promote technology transfer (adult education); or the management of fiscal affairs. The ASTE program prepares people educated in agriculture to perform effectively administrative and supervisory roles as part of technology transfer and program leadership in less developed countries.

Problem Statement

Although this program offers considerable benefits, a recruitment and retention strategy had not been designed or implemented, nor did international students at USU have an official support system. The Department often loses track of these students once they complete the degree and return to their home countries. Consequently, there is no continued linkage with the College of Agriculture or Utah State University. To develop a strategic plan, it was necessary to: (1) evaluate
current international student recruitment or retention policies at USU, (2) determine the needs of international students, (3) learn how to accommodate international students attending USU, (4) provide continued linkages to graduates, and (5) develop a standardized means of advertising and promoting the program.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of this project was to develop and implement a recruitment strategy to increase enrollment in the International Agricultural Extension Specialist option within the Agricultural Systems Technology Master of Science Program.

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Construct and use a student and country information guide for curriculum development at the beginning of each student's program.

2. Organize a support mechanism (i.e., mentoring, networking) for international students upon entering the College of Agriculture.

3. Develop an ASTE student data base for follow-up and a continued linkage with alumni.

4. Design recruitment materials to promote the degree. Those materials will include the following: a brochure outlining requirements for the degree, a mailing list of agencies that sponsor international student education, and a newsletter sent to students quarterly and graduates annually.

Review Of Literature

U.S. higher educational institutions will actively recruit international students due to the decrease in U.S. student enrollment and new governmental initiatives that encourage foreign student enrollment (National Association For Foreign Student Affairs [NAFSA], 1986). Lower enrollments, in general, will increase the importance of student recruitment (U.S. Census Bureau, 1977). Recruitment activities are influenced by several factors, including the size of a program (people), person(s) accountable for planning recruitment strategies (structure), environment of a program, and the utilization of specifically stated recruitment strategies (technology); therefore, the use of selected recruitment strategies can differ significantly (Johnson, 1987).

A successful recruitment program for graduate students must be a cooperative effort between the graduate school and the academic departments (Baron, 1987). Baron's five-step recruitment and retention model included (a) preparing an assessment in the four major areas of institutional analysis, student analysis, competitive analysis, and job market analysis; (b) develop recruitment and enrollment objectives; (c) develop a recruitment plan and strategies; (d) implement the program; and (e) monitor and evaluate the recruitment program.

A long-range retention plan should influence the retention of students inclined to leave, encourage current students not yet inclined to leave, and stimulate future students by upgrading the level of educational services provided (Ramist, 1981; Noel, Levitz & Saluri, 1985). Students who obtained financial aid (grants or scholarships) were more likely to graduate than non-recipients (Bergen, Upham, & Bergen, 1970; Astin, 1975). An orientation process has also been shown to improve retention (Ramist, 1981). The quality of faculty-student interactions is a significant determinant of student retention (Pascarella & Terenizini, 1979; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). The academic and student support services should increase the retention and graduation rates of minority students (Eggler & Arellano-Romero, 1987). Appropriate advising and counseling services often determined the success or failure of students (NAFSA, 1986). Students did well in environments where they were accepted (Pascarello & Terenizini, 1979; Astin, 1982).

International students studying agriculture in the United States rarely receive assistance on how to cope with cultural and economic shock (in the U.S. and upon the return to their home country). Specific student needs were often not considered and/or there were misunderstandings between students and their academic adviser (Steele, 1990).

Methods And Products Summary

Selected Utah State University staff employed by different student agencies and the International
Student Office were interviewed in an effort to determine if USU had a recruitment procedure specifically designed to recruit international students. A recruitment strategy for international students was developed based on these findings. Information was compiled about each international student and their country of origin. This information aids in curriculum development and helps to incorporate the sponsor's and country's needs. An international student organization was also initiated, to provide mentoring and networking. A data base was developed to track international student alumni by name, identification number, and professional placement. A brochure, an extensive mailing list, and an annual newsletter was developed for College and Departmental use in marketing the degree. Funds were provided by the International Agricultural Programs Office and the University International Programs Office.

Conclusions And Recommendations
Utah State University recruited ethnic minorities through the Center for Cultural Pluralism, but no recruitment strategy had been developed for international students. The USU International Student Office encourages each college to establish and implement a recruitment strategy.

The lack of coordination between the USU administrative offices and the individual colleges hinders student acclimation. Services provided by the International Student Office include orientation (individual and group), International Student Council, and individual country organizations (which are socially oriented). The Director of the International Student Office expressed concerns about the lack of support after the orientation session and the lack of coordination between the International Student Office and individual colleges. The five areas of deficiency included (a) no contact person in the college, (b) no individual college orientation, (c) limited introductory college advisement, (d) lack of advisor availability, and (e) no mentoring group within the college. The International Student Office assists approximately 1,100 students annually and does not have the staff or expertise to cover the deficient areas. The proposed recruitment strategy was developed to increase enrollment in the International Agricultural Extension Specialist degree option.

Student and Country Information Guide
The student and country information guide provides information about the individual student; geographic, demographic, and economic background of the student's country; and people important to the student's program, i.e., sponsor, family, community figureheads (for continued communication and possible professional placement). Such detailed information is necessary to develop the most applicable program for each student. Students will be encouraged to provide this information prior to their arrival at USU, or to obtain it from USU's library after their arrival. This guide will benefit the department as well as the student, country, and sponsoring agency.

International Agricultural Student Organization
The international agricultural students perceived a need for an international student organization within the College of Agriculture. Representatives were appointed from each department to help establish the organization. International students expressed concerns about their careers when they returned home and an interest in information about job availability and career placement. They also were interested in being able to maintain a relationship with USU after they return home. Social events involving social and cultural traditions from their countries were also considered important. We recommended that the representatives have regular monthly board meetings and elect a chairperson, who would also represent the international agricultural students as a member of the Agricultural Council within the College of Agriculture.
Student Data Base

The computerized student data base would serve as a recruitment tool, a method to track alumni, a mailing list for newsletters to disseminate information about the department and/or job placement opportunities. The student information will be updated as students graduate. The students will fill out an alumni card for the college and one for the department. The data base makes it possible to identify students by name, social security number (student identification number), employment, and area of specialization.

Recruitment Materials

Printed recruitment materials, the brochure and newsletter, will supplement efforts to increase enrollment in the International Agriculture Extension Specialist program. The brochure will be updated to reflect new educational requirements. Brochures will be mailed to sponsoring agencies every June to provide enough time to meet student admission requirements for fall quarter. The brochure can also be sent to others inquiring about the program. The brochure's effectiveness should be evaluated in two years. The mailing list currently contains 1,200 names and addresses and can be updated as needed. The newsletter will be sent quarterly to all students and annually to alumni. It will contain general information and news about the college and/or department.

Summary

A recruitment strategy for ethnic minorities administered through the Center for Cultural Pluralism exists at USU, but a similar program had not been developed for international students. There was also a lack of coordination between the USU administrative offices and the individual colleges.

The proposed recruitment strategy was based on obtaining more information about students and their countries of origin, which will facilitate development of an appropriate curriculum. An organization for international students majoring in an agricultural discipline will also be created to facilitate adaptation and the exchange of information. A computerized list contains the names of all students and will be used to track graduates. Twelve hundred brochures were printed and mailed to the different agencies. The mailing list contains 1,200 names and addresses will be upgraded. A newsletter will be sent to students and alumni. The recruitment strategies and the methods used in it must be continually monitored, evaluated, and revised. Perhaps the best recruitment strategy is to treat students well. Graduates can then be an effective recruitment tool for the department.

References


