

Graduate student recruitment program

Important notes:

- Not every suggestion in this document, and related ones to follow, will work for every A&S graduate program.
- View the suggested steps and systems as options for your program to consider, and adopt those that seem both reasonable and doable for your situation.
- In order for a graduate student recruitment program to work, it must be practical, doable, affordable, and routinely evaluated.
- Successful graduate student recruitment involves more than just providing information. It also involves building relationships with those recruits that you hope to convert to enrollees.
- Sustainability of a successful graduate student recruitment program rests on department wide adoption of recruitment systems.

Key goals and traits of a powerful graduate recruitment program include:

Step 1 - Generation as large of an inquiry pool as possible.

Step 2 - Convert inquiries into applicants.

Step 3 - Convert your best applicants into enrollees.

I. Short-term actions – start immediately.

1. Evaluation of your current graduate program in the areas of:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Mix (e.g., gender, ethnicity, domestic/foreign, MS/PhD)

2. Determine optimal graduate student capacity for your program.

3. Develop clear and actionable written recruitment goals for your program for:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Mix

The goal for quantity of students in your graduate program is determined by your program's capacity. Quality can be measured by factors like GRE scores, time to graduation, numbers and types of professional outcomes (e.g., papers/posters presented at professional meetings, manuscripts submitted for publication), placement after graduation.

4. Set up a budget for graduate student recruitment. But remember, enrollment objectives **always** drive your recruitment program and **not** the budget. A good recruitment plan does not have to cost a lot. Also be realistic in how much you try to accomplish each year. Full implementation of your recruitment systems may take a few years.

Your program's web status. Three aspects of your website deserve attention. Its position in a search results; the page a searcher lands on when selecting your link; and the quality of the site. In most cases academic programs only worry about number three, site quality.

Your website is extremely important for two reasons. First, visibility for potential students unaware of your program, and second, getting information out and available to prospective students interested in your program. Note that while your website is a good information tool, by itself it is a poor recruitment tool. (Good recruitment involves multiplatform, mixed media follow-up with appropriate timing and frequency.)

Your site's position in a generic search(optimization status)

“First page traction” (high optimization status) for a website in a general search is essential, and ideally you want the link to your program to be one of the first five on page one. Studies shows that only 20% of searches will access page 2 of a search results, and progressively far fewer will view pages 3, 4...etc. Basically, if the link to your program does not appear on the first page, it is nearly invisible on the www.

5. Check on optimization status of your site – collecting some information.

A. Using your search engine (e.g., Google, Yahoo), do a general search for: “graduate programs in _____”. Examine each link on each page, keeping track of what these take you to, until you find your program's web site.

- What page in the search results, and rank, does the link to your department/program appear?
- As you evaluate each link, take note of what these are, and where your competition is positioned.
- Does your first link appearance take you your department/program home page? Your graduate program recruitment page? Does other department/program related content appear before your website? Is it the page you want interested students to first see (land on)?

B. Conduct focused search (e.g., graduate programs in _____ Wyoming).

- What page in the search results, and rank, does the link to your department/program appear?
- As you evaluate each link, take note of what these are, and where your competition is positioned.
- Does your first link appearance take you your department/program home page? Your graduate program recruitment page? Does other department/program related content appear before your website? Is it the page you want interested students to first see (land on)?

6. Search engine optimization (SEO) for your website – assuming this is needed

Apparently, optimization of a website is not difficult, and there are two general approaches, one costs money, the other not. For the “no cost” method you will need to have someone in your department with the web skills, or time and interest to learn, to do the SEO. Both Google and Yahoo have lots of information and provide free SEO and other Web analytic tools. **Marketleap.com** is another source for several free SEO tools. The alternative is to pay to have your site optimized. We were told that university campuses have lots of student SEO talent, and first time full optimization should be achievable for no more than \$300-400. Other SEO websites that come recommended include (some fees may apply):

Bruceclay.com	Keyworddiscovery.com	Sempo.org
Highratings.com	Searchenginewatch.com	Webtrends.com (\$329/yr; what pros use)

30 Nov 2008

Use of key words is critical for optimization. This includes title, descriptors, and keywords. However, do not exceed 12 words for title, 24 words for descriptors, and 48 words for keywords section, as this will trigger optimization penalties.

6. Begin to collect data. If possible, go back and collect any data used from the last year or two, this will give you a foundation of information to start with. Start collecting data now even though we are well into the current recruitment cycle. Nationally this cycle is considered to start in early September. A database is needed to keep your recruitment data organized and useful. Excel works if you do not have a data base program. The goal is to have all of your decisions and actions related to graduate student recruitment based on data.

You need to keep track of:

- Date your program is contacted by a prospective student, source of inquiry
- Date you receive an application from a prospective student
- Dates and types of communications with prospective students
- Student specific data (e.g., state, current college/university, area of interest, GRE scores)

Set up focus group sessions using two groups of current students, graduate students, and senior/junior undergraduate students. In the graduate student session you are looking for information on:

- What they were looking for in a graduate program, what was important to them.
- What they thought worked well with your current recruitment system.
- What they thought did not work well, or was not student friendly about your current system.
- Recommendations they would have about improving your current recruitment system.
- Recruitment practices from other institutions they considered to be positive.

For the undergraduate student focus session. First have them go to your website to examine the content on your graduate programs. Bring any printed recruitment materials (e.g., brochures, posters, and form letters) to the meeting. At the focus group meeting discuss:

- What would they consider important when looking at and comparing graduate programs.
- What they think of your website, good, bad and ugly.
- Have a discussion about types of technology and media they find most useful.
- Show them the printed matter. Have them be critical about content, layouts, and effectiveness.

Please watch for more information and suggestions on ways to improve your graduate student recruitment efforts and results. Also, the Graduate School is scheduling a workshop on graduate student recruitment, 28 January 2009, 1:00 to 3:00.