

Campus Visitation Programs: A Needs Assessment

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When deciding which college to attend, consumers of higher education must rely on several factors, including their impressions from college visits (Confessore, 2003). Dickinson (2003) stated that printed material and personal one-on-one interactions were more influential than mass media. For this reason it is imperative that colleges and universities regularly assess their campus visitation programs to determine what visitors are expecting. Why assess expectations rather than satisfaction with the visit itself? It is important to know what visitors are expecting so that an institution can meet and exceed those expectations. If expectations are not met, a student may not matriculate to that institution.

Although a great deal can be learned from a campus visit (Planz & Lorenzo, 1993), campuses have different ways of offering their services. Some colleges offer specialized tours that may cover the library, sports facilities, research labs, performing arts centers, or horticulture gardens (Freedman, 2001). Other variations in campus visits include employing students to coordinate and lead tours or having alumni help with this important recruitment tool. The institution must determine the best way to offer services to potential students who visit because campus visits are such a significant factor in a student's decision-making process when selecting an institution.

This assessment was conducted through the Student Orientation and Retention (SOAR) office at Oregon State University, a large, four-year public university. The survey was designed to gain an understanding of the services that campus visitors were expecting prior to the visit. It also provided an opportunity for visitors to communicate other information that would help fulfill their expectations of a campus visit.

Introduction

With rising costs of college attendance and intense competition among state universities nationally, it is important for campus recruitment and retention offices to conduct regular assessments of their campus visitation procedures. Researchers including Alexander Astin, founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, found that the campus visit was the most important factor in high school seniors' choice of college (Swann & Henderson, 1998). Swann and Henderson also determined

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that the visit was the single most effective recruitment tool. Given the importance of campus visits, institutions must regularly assess the way they conduct their programs.

“Admissions officers began involving their entire campuses in visitation programs and found Deans of Students, housing, and financial aid offices especially helpful,” according to Swann and Henderson (1998). The coordination of these diverse offices is complex and involves many issues such as staffing concerns, time and budget constraints, and conflicting office missions that may hinder the visitation process. Because of such constraints, it is easy to see why visitation programs nationwide vary their practices.

“Some institutions have turned over all or some of their visitation program to the computer or via the Internet; however, you can be truly enlightened only by a real campus visit” (Begun & Stroup, 2000). Even in this age of virtual campus tours through a school’s website or CD-ROM, a formal campus tour during a visit is considered essential (Johnson, 2000).

Although a great deal can be learned from a campus visit, especially if a potential student is able to talk to a current student (Planz & Lorenzo, 1993), all campuses have different ways of offering their services. By determining which aspects of a campus visit potential students find most important, institutions can more efficiently allocate their resources.

Research Methods

The data for this assessment were collected from potential students visiting Oregon State University (OSU). OSU is a large four-year, public, Carnegie Doctoral/Research-Extensive institution. It is Oregon's only land-, sea-, and space-grant university and focuses on providing learning opportunities for Oregonians (“Mission Statement”).

The methods used to collect and analyze data for this assessment were both quantitative and qualitative. The researcher-designed instrument was one page in length and consisted of three sections. The first section contained seven closed-ended and partially closed-ended questions that addressed demographic data as well as information regarding specifics about a potential student’s visit. The second section asked each participant to rank the importance of different activities using a Likert-scale. The last section asked three open-ended questions that addressed various visitation topics.

The student TOUR (Team of Undergraduate Recruiters) leaders were enlisted to administer the surveys. TOUR leaders are undergraduate students who coordinate and conduct campus tours and answer general questions about OSU. To ensure that the survey was distributed correctly, TOUR leaders underwent a training session before participating.

Surveys were distributed on odd-numbered days. A “survey day” reminder card was placed at the TOUR workstation and an e-mail reminder was sent to the TOUR e-mail account on days the survey was to be distributed.

TOUR leaders gave potential students the survey along with a standard check-in

form given to all campus visitors. Visitors who were not potential students were not asked to fill out the survey. Survey participants filled out both forms in a waiting area. Attached to the survey were two duplicate consent forms. The consent forms directed potential students to sign both forms, remove the top form for their files, and place the remaining documents, whether complete or not, in the “completed survey” box. If survey participants were under the age of 18, the consent form instructed them to have a parent or legal guardian sign as well. The survey was voluntary and participants were not given any compensation as a result of taking the survey.

Data were collected from November 4, 2002, until January 31, 2003, which is typically the peak visitation period at OSU. February 1, 2003, was the deadline for submission of freshman applications to OSU for the 2003-2004 academic year. After the application deadline, daily visits tend to taper off for the remainder of the academic year.

Results

This assessment was designed to evaluate the importance of certain components of campus visits and prospective students’ expectations of a campus visit prior to the “official” OSU visit.

Out of the 183 surveys distributed, 106 surveys were returned to the collection box. Of the surveys that were returned, several had questions that were unanswered, and one entire survey was left blank.

The sample population consisted primarily of high school seniors, who comprised 65 of the respondents. Of the remaining 35 respondents, one was a high school freshman; there were two high school sophomores, one high school junior, and 33 transfer students. Three people did not indicate their class standing. The sample population consisted of 69 in-state visitors and 33 out-of-state visitors. Of the total respondents, 85 scheduled their visit ahead of time (either by phone or Internet), 18 were walk-in (unscheduled) visitors, and 3 left the question blank.

A majority (54) of the respondents indicated that their ideal visit would last 1 to 2 hours and 31 indicated that an appropriate time for a campus visit was 3 to 4 hours. Seven people answered that the ideal amount of time for a campus visit was more than 4 hours and 7 people said that 30 minutes were adequate. There were 6 respondents who chose not to answer this question.

When answering the question, “Was this your first visit to Oregon State University?,” 75 respondents said “yes” and 28 said “no.” The average number of times a visitor had been to campus prior to taking the survey was two. Of the total surveyed sample, 71 respondents visited other campuses besides the OSU campus and 33 had visited only OSU. The average number of other campuses visited was approximately two (1.97).

Most campus visitors surveyed (71) came to the campus with family. Nineteen visited alone, and 14 brought someone other than a family member. These respondents listed the following as people who accompanied them on their visit: friend, boyfriend, aunt, spouse, and roommate.

A Likert-scale was used to assess what aspects of a campus visit were found to be “very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not important.” See Table 1 for the results of this portion of the survey.

The remainder of the survey consisted of three open-ended questions:

Question 9: How did you find out about visiting OSU?

The largest number of respondents (33) found out about visiting OSU online while 20 people found out about visiting campus through friends. OSU mailings also played a role in getting students to campus. Of the 106 people surveyed, 12 indicated that they found out about visiting from OSU direct mailings or the OSU Viewbook. Family members influenced 11 of the respondents to visit campus, and 11 respondents wrote that they found out about visiting from someone at their high school. Current students influenced 9 respondents to visit. The remaining responses were influenced by direct contact with an OSU representative (4), living nearby (4), and hearing about visiting from a college fair (3). Other comments included the following: the specific names of individuals; “I walked in the front door”; “I went to an open house and wanted something more personal”; “OSU application packet”; “alumni”; “collegeboard.com”; “through Mt. Hood Community College”; “It’s just something you do with every college you apply to”; “I applied and decided to schedule a tour”; “TV”; and “through the yellow pages.”

Question 10: What is your definition of a successful campus visit?

Visitors indicated six general responses. Nineteen people responded with “getting the information I need, and learning all I wanted to know.” “Getting a feel for campus/school atmosphere” was the second most popular answer with 17 responses. Fifteen people said that “getting my questions answered” defined a successful campus visit. Eleven respondents wrote that “meeting people on campus, learning campus resources, and seeing facilities” constituted a successful campus visit. Five people said that a successful visit was one that helped them make a decision on whether or not to attend OSU.

Five respondents suggested that “Coming away with a positive feeling/view” of OSU resulted in a successful visit. Some other comments were as follows: “search for it on the Internet”; “getting an overall view of what I need to be admitted”; “meeting items above”; “if raining, ask if someone needs an umbrella”; “I’m not sure”; and “NA.”

Question 11: Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Twenty-five people indicated that there was nothing else they would like OSU to know. Other responses were as follows: “You are doing a great job”; “Why is gender a question on welcome form? Is this relevant? What if I don’t know my gender?”; “Jun and Brie [two group tour leaders] are awesome!”; “How do you meet with a faculty member?”; and lastly, “In the beginning of my contact with OSU, it seemed as though the people responding to my e-mails did not know what was going on. They were asking me questions I had already answered, lost one of my transcripts, e-mailed me addressing

my e-mail to 'Karen' (my name is Kelly) and responses were sometimes slow. Maybe if one person was in contact with me and helping along with the admission process, it would have made for smoother and more effective communication?"

Discussion

The implications of this study at OSU are important to continuing quality service for campus visitors. It is important to realize that respondents were not comparing each of the categories to each other, but rather acknowledging what they consider to be "very important."

The results of this survey also reflected the importance of academics, with many students indicating that meeting with an academic adviser was "very important." In another study of two surveys of freshmen students, academic *needs* were found to be of primary importance, compared to social and personal *needs* (Moore, Higginson, & White, 1981).

This information is useful not only in understanding what visitors want in a campus visit, but also crucial when determining budget allocations. Assessment provides the concrete data that can support the rationale for funding campus programs; this can have a substantial impact on services offered to potential students. An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that the services currently offered at OSU were "very important" or "somewhat important." Through personal interaction with visitors, prospective students' commitment to the university may increase making them more likely to apply and eventually attend an institution.

Several limitations and biases emerged in conducting this survey. The number of varying survey administrators and the lack of a prepared script resulted in participants not necessarily receiving the same instructions when they were given the survey. This could lead to inconsistencies in completion rates and may have changed a participant's willingness to answer questions.

Weekend visitors may have different expectations of a campus visit than those visiting during the week. For example, weekend visitors may expect to stay overnight on campus, whereas a visitor who is on campus for a day during the work or school week may expect a shorter visit. Also, visitors not scheduled through the SOAR office were not surveyed. Visitors who arrive to campus unscheduled may also have different expectations than those who participate in a formal, scheduled visit. A lack of resources made it difficult to survey weekend visitors.

Weekend visitors do not have the option to observe a class, talk to a faculty member, or visit the financial aid office. In all of these cases, resources are not currently available to accommodate their needs. A separate survey should be derived to assess the needs of weekend visitors.

Two biases introduced while conducting this research were that one of the researchers worked in the SOAR Office during the survey period and the other researcher worked in a similar office at another institution. Both biases could have influenced the way the results were interpreted or the way the instrument was designed.

Although this assessment outlined interesting and useful information for the researcher and the institution, further assessment is warranted. The following are some issues not addressed in this study that should be included in future studies: How to survey and accommodate the needs of weekend visitors; what other campuses the prospective student has visited; and which aspect of a campus visit is the most important to prospective students.

Also it is important to note not only how many campuses a potential student has visited but also the names or types of those institutions. Visiting other campuses can change the expectations of a campus visit for a potential student. Additionally, private, smaller institutions may have more time, money, and resources to devote to visitors, which may possibly raise the visitation standards for other institutions.

A post-visit survey also would enhance our understanding of the campus visit experience. Visitors come with a preconceived notion of the way they would like their visit to be. The focus of this assessment was the preconceived notion of how a potential new student's visit should be. However, it is equally important to assess a potential new student's expectations before the visit compared to how they felt about it afterwards. For example, if prospective students believe a successful visit as lasting 4 hours, institutions may start changing our practices to reflect that. If potential students decide that a 2-hour tour is long enough to get what they need, practices may change to reflect what students are expecting rather than what they actually experienced.

In closing, this survey and its results can prove to be useful to an institution. By conducting an assessment of this sort, institutions can evaluate the needs of their campus visitors to help allocate resources and recruit students more efficiently.

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TABLE 1

	Very Important: (1)	Somewhat Important: (2)	Not Important: (3)	No Answer:
Touring Campus	77	18	5	5
Observing an OSU class	16	65	17	7
Touring Living Groups	30	46	19	7
Meeting with an academic adviser	60	34	7	4
Meeting with an OSU faculty member	28	54	19	4
Meeting with current OSU students	25	56	18	2
Meeting with an admissions counselor (enrollment representative)	63	31	7	4
Learning about campus activities and resources	62	33	6	4
Learning about admissions requirements	71	20	8	5
Learning about financial aid and scholarships	78	18	5	4
Overnight stay	5	26	65	7
Other_____				105