

University of Rhode Island
REPORT OF THE ADMISSIONS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
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THE CAMPUS VISIT EXPERIENCE: IMPROVING STUDENT RECRUITMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

The campus visit experience is of key importance in student recruitment and yield.

Researchers and practitioners in higher education have long noted the importance of the campus visit to student plans to apply to an institution and the decision to matriculate (Stahmann, Hanson & Whittlesey, 1971; Menacker, 1972; Gasperetti, 1974; Campbell, 1977; Dembowski, 1980; Maguire, 1981; King, Kobayashi & Bigler, 1986; Yost & Tucker, 1995; Thomas, Reznik & Dawes, 1999; Sevier, 2000; Fischbach, 2006).

Recent polls have confirmed the important role of the campus visit:

- In 2004, the Arts & Science Group, a higher education consulting firm, polled 500 college-bound high school seniors and found that 65 percent of the students considered campus visits to be very influential sources of information about where to apply, and that “the campus visit figures prominently in students’ enrollment decisions” (Arts & Sciences Group, 2004).
- In 2007 Eduventures conducted a national Web-based survey of 7,867 high school juniors and seniors and 12 focus group sessions. Most students (71 percent) said a campus visit was their most trusted source of information in the college search process (Ashburn, 2007).
- In 2009, Cohen used Zinch.com, a college admissions portal, to survey a random sample of 1,100 high school seniors who had completed the college admissions process and made college choices. He found that, “visits to colleges were, by far, the most important factor in a student’s decision about where to apply” (Cohen, 2009).

Richard. A. Hesel, Principal of Art & Science Group, concluded, “In my 25-plus years as a consultant in higher education, and in the course of innumerable recruitment studies conducted for colleges and universities of every size, affiliation, and mission over the years, one finding has remained constant: the campus visit is the single most influential source of information for students in college choice” (Arts & Sciences Group, 2004).

Attention to recruitment and yield is essential for URI’s financial health.

As we noted in last year’s report on departmental Web sites, effective recruitment and yield of prospective students is essential for the health of the University of Rhode Island and its programs.

State funding for URI has been reduced steadily over the past decade. As a result the university’s dependence on the revenue stream from tuition and fees has increased. According to Vice President for Administration and Finance Robert A. Weygand, over 70% of the current university operating budget comes from tuition and fees. For this reason, successfully attracting prospective students and convincing them to attend URI determines to a large part whether or not the university can fulfill its mission.

Experts making recommendations about facilities and amenities related to the campus visit focus on the “visitor experience.”

Consultants and admissions experts regularly offer recommendations about all aspects of the campus visit, including advice about facilities and amenities for visitors.

Jeff Kallay, Experience Evangelist at the TargetX consulting firm, writes, “What makes for great campus visits? First and foremost, it’s a great ‘aesthetic’” (Kallay, 2009). Bob Johnson, President of Bob Johnson Consulting, adds, “Ensure that initial ‘curb appeal’ gets things off to a fine start. Review the entrance to campus, the parking area, and the first step inside the door of your admissions office with fresh eyes and beautify as best you can” (Johnson, 2009). Rick Hesel, Principal of the Arts & Sciences Group, concurs, advising institutions to “assess and address the first-impression details... Signage leading to the campus, routes to the campus, appearance of campus gateways and grounds, parking arrangements for visitors, overall cleanliness of the campus, appearance of the office and staff greeting visitors — all of these are part of the important first impression made on visiting students and parents” (Klein, 2004).

Aaron Basko, Director of Admissions at Salisbury University in Salisbury, Maryland, notes, “The tour is just one component of a visitation system. That system begins with the information students receive about visiting and continues through issues like scheduling, parking, reception, and follow-up. You can offer a world-class campus tour, but if a family is greeted rudely or spends 30 minutes circling the campus to park, that great tour gets lost. Your staff, students, facilities, and processes all need to be aligned to deliver the best possible visit experience” (Evaluation is key in making the most of campus visits, 2009).

Basko also offers specific suggestions about presentation facilities. He comments, “The ideal presentation space is near to other campus visit locations in order to minimize walking time for families; can be adapted to small or large groups; is away from areas with a lot of traffic flow; does not have big windows with a lot of distracting activity outside; and has comfortable seats and a manageable temperature” (Basko, 2009).

Many schools have constructed top-notch welcome centers and admissions facilities.

A number of higher education institutions, some of which are URI’s direct competitors, have recognized the importance of creating favorable first impressions and have constructed welcome centers to greet prospective students and parents as they arrive on campus. Recent examples include:

- Brickman Center for Student Life and Admissions at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, PA. This 31,500 square foot facility opened in 2009. “The building marks an entrance to the college and serves as a welcome center, housing admissions and financial aid offices. It was also designed to serve as a hub for student activities and includes a gallery, dining and kitchen facilities, space for student activities, and a student-health center” (Biemiller, 2010)
- Teaching, Education, Collaboration and Help (TECH) Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. The TECH Center is a facility of over 75,000 square feet that houses more than 700 computers, group study rooms, and lounge areas. The campus welcome center on the ground floor makes the TECH Center a showpiece for prospective students and their parents (Carlson, 2006).
- Admissions Office, Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA. Renovations to the admissions office included an upgrade to the reception area, with a fireplace installed and improvements to traffic flow. The facility includes first-floor interview rooms that are accessible and appealing. To create a warm welcome, quality of coffee was improved, candy in campus colors is distributed, and a lemonade stand staffed by tour guides is set up on hot summer days. Application numbers improved in the first year following the changes. By the second year, the conversion rate for students touring campus improved by about 15 percent. The percentage of students surveyed reporting that they were much more interested in Franklin & Marshall after their visit increased from 41 percent before the changes to 72 percent. Total visitors and number of applications also increased (Basko, 2008).
- Welcome Center, Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN. Completed in 2000, the 2,161 square foot center “was conceived as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the institution. Its purpose was to establish an appropriate identity for the prestigious women’s college, as well as to create a memorable first impression for visitors and prospective students” (Outstanding buildings, 2001)
- Welcome Center, University of Houston, Houston, TX. Completed in 2006, the 28,000 square foot center “serves as the ceremonial point of entry to the campus. In addition to greeting new and prospective students and their families to the campus, the center also houses admissions, financial aid and scholarships, registration and academic records, and student financial services” (Outstanding designs, 2007).
- Welcome Center, University of Minnesota, Morris, MN. Renovations to the building, originally built in 1915, were completed in 2010. The Welcome Center serves as a gateway to the campus

and meets LEED standards, highlighting the university's commitment to sustainability. It houses Admissions, Alumni Relations and Annual Giving, and other offices (University of Minnesota, Morris).

- Visitors Center, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. The former University Club was transformed into a visitors' center. The center is easily accessible from the interstate and offers ample parking, making it easier for families to visit the campus. All information sessions and bus and walking tours originate from the center (University of Tennessee, 2006).
- Admissions Visitor Center, Northeastern University, Boston, MA. The Admissions Visitor Center is located inside the Behrakis Health Sciences Center conveniently close to a campus parking garage. The center includes a presentation room that seats about 40, a comfortable waiting area, and rooms for interviews or private consultations.

The visitor experience at URI has recently been improved.

An information session for prospective students is offered daily at 11:45 a.m. in the Great Room on the second floor of Green Hall, which seats 80. The information session provides an overview of URI, focusing on the application process, as well as a general overview of academics, athletics, and student life. Before spring semester 2010, information sessions were held in the Memorial Union, first in Room 318 and then in the space formerly occupied by the America's Cup Room. Green Hall has the advantage of being located closer to the Visitor's Center and the main visitor parking lot behind the Center. Green Hall is an attractive, newly-renovated, historic building close to the Quadrangle.

Three student-led campus tours are offered daily. Approximately 90 minutes long, tours provide prospective students and their families the opportunity to visit academic buildings, the library, residence halls, dining halls, recreation facilities, and the Memorial Union. Tours scheduled for 10:00 am and 2:00 pm Monday through Friday, as well as all Saturday tours, begin and end at the Memorial Union, where visitors have easy access to food and drink. On Monday through Friday, the 12:30 tour leaves from Green Hall after the 11:45 information session and ends at the Union.

URI does not offer interviews, but prospective students who wish to meet with admission counselors ("counselors on duty") must go to Undergraduate Admissions in Newman Hall. Parking at Newman Hall is limited, and families often walk there from the parking lot near the Visitor Center. During the winter, sidewalks on Upper College Road are frequently not shoveled, making it necessary to walk in the road.

Since the "Undergraduate Admissions" sign in front of Newman Hall is the first thing that visiting families see upon entering campus, they have tended to stop there only to learn that they must get back in their cars and proceed to the Visitor Center to park. This additional stop often results in their being late for information sessions or tours. Admissions has recently addressed this situation by placing a temporary sign on the lawn of Newman Hall that reads "Campus Tours: Proceed to Visitor Center." The sign has been effective in decreasing the number of visitors who make unnecessary stops at Newman Hall, though a permanent sign would look more attractive and appropriate.

Additional improvements to URI's admissions facilities are recommended.

Recent improvements notwithstanding, the visitor experience at URI would be greatly enhanced by creating a single space for greeting prospective students and their families, offering information sessions, serving as a departure point for tours, and accommodating individual counseling sessions. Ideally, such a space would be convenient to parking and food facilities.

The Admissions Advisory Committee found that the ideal facility for campus visits by prospective students would meet the following criteria:

Location

- It should be housed in an **attractive building** that serves as the symbolic “front door” of the University.
- The building should be **easy to find** and located **near the start of the campus tour route**.
- There should be adequate visitor **parking** within close proximity to the building.

Facilities

- The building should include a welcoming and comfortable **reception area**, with brochure racks for recruitment literature. The reception area should be large enough to accommodate groups of people (up to 50) who are waiting to go on tour.
- Facilities should exist that would allow visitors to be offered light **refreshments** (e.g. coffee, tea, or water) when they arrive.
- The building should house a state-of-the-art “**presentation room**” that seats a minimum of 80 people.
- **Meeting rooms** should be available for individual consultations with admissions counselors.
- Ideally, **offices for Admissions staff** would be located in the same facility to enable adequate supervision of both the campus-visit and back-office operations by the Dean of Admission.

Recommendation of the Committee

Given the substantial evidence that improving the college visit experience improves recruitment and yield of prospective students, and given examples of well-designed visitor facilities at other, often competing, institutions, the Admissions Advisory Committee recommends that university planners recognize the importance of the visitor experience at the University of Rhode Island, with specific regard to first impressions, adequate facilities, and parking. We urge that a Welcome Center / Admissions facility be made a priority as plans are developed for campus construction and renovations.

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