**Search for Opportunities**

The unofficial motto at Concordia, Nebraska is “Students are our number one priority”. The president says this at every faculty meeting and at almost every other opportunity. And with good reason – without students a university is just a collection of faculty talking to the walls. So the question of how the university recruits students is vital to the working of the institution. Recently, people have realized that keeping students who come is just as important as recruiting them in the first place, so retention has become a priority.

To learn about recruitment and retention I spoke with Aaron Roberts, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, and with Angela Muller, Director of Freshman Advising and Retention. The Admissions staff consists of Aaron and five other admissions counselors, plus a visit coordinator, an administrative assistant and many student workers who lead tours and interact with prospective students. The retention staff consists of Angela and one other freshman advisor, plus the many other faculty and staff the freshman advisors work with to improve retention. The admissions office is under the supervision of the Vice President for Enrollment Management, Student Services and Athletics, while the retention staff is under the supervision of the Provost.

Concordia’s first contact with students may come in several ways. The admissions staff keeps a record with roughly 100 different ways students first make contact with Concordia. Some students visit the website and choose to apply online. Unsolicited applications were rare in the past, but students today are more likely to treat the free application in the way past students used an informational postcard. Many student names come from referrals by alumni, teachers, or pastors. Sports and music camps, and a very visible presence at the LCMS national youth gathering are also a rich source of potential students. Other students select Concordia on their FAFSA form. Finally, Concordia purchases student names from ACT, SAT and NRCCUA. This avenue has increased dramatically in recent years, up from around 4000 names a few years ago to around 9000 names today. While purchased names have a relatively low yield of enrolled students, the names are inexpensive to purchase, and the admissions office increases the odds by purchasing names of sophomores rather than seniors (who have probably already made up their minds).
After Concordia has become aware of the name of a potential student, the admissions office has a schedule of seven mailings to the student and parents that go to every name they have. If a student shows interest, there may be eight to ten more mailings, plus email and phone contact from admissions staff. This process has led to about 1000 students accepted for fall of 2009. Of those, 335 have committed by sending a deposit; some will always back out at the last minute, and other students may still commit. The admissions staff is optimistic that they will reach their goal of 345 committed by the beginning of the fall semester. The past two years 312 have committed, so this larger number would be a great benefit.

As with all things, the recruiting strategy has changed in recent years. In addition to eliminating the application fee and implementing online application, the admissions office has put an calculator online that allows prospective students to determine their academic financial aid award immediately. The admissions process is tracked more closely than before so that students do not fall through the cracks, and the admissions counselors work more closely with the financial aid office, so that counselors are familiar with each student’s financial aid package, in case there are questions. The admissions office also uses the Performa Higher Education services, which analyzes data from recruits to predict which are most likely to enroll and which need the most follow-up.

The geographical recruiting philosophy of the admissions office has also changed. Concordia Nebraska has traditionally drawn students from all over the country, but due to financial limitations and changing student preferences, counselors no longer travel farther west than Arizona or east than Michigan. However, coaches may recruit from other areas; this year a large group of athletes is coming from Florida. Instead of covering the entire country, the admissions staff is concentrating much more on the state of Nebraska. When looking at where recruits who ended up not going to Concordia went, it turns out that 25% went to public colleges in the state and 12% went to other private colleges in the state. Only 7% went to other CUS institutions. So the biggest competitors by far are Nebraska schools. Aaron feels that Nebraska students are the untapped market for Concordia. Our nearest competitor schools – in terms of location, size and program – have student bodies that are 90% from Nebraska. Concordia’s student body is currently 40% from Nebraska. Aaron believes that in 6-8 years Concordia will have more students from Nebraska than it has who are LCMS.
Concordia faculty are also heavily involved in recruitment. Nearly 500 prospective students visited the campus, and recruits report that campus visits that include meeting with faculty in their area are the strongest selling point for the university. Departments have representatives at mass visit days where they meet with several prospective students at a time. Many students schedule individual visits as well, and most of those include meetings with faculty. In the past year I met with approximately 30 prospective students; some faculty meet with many more, some less. In addition, program representatives receive the names of students who have been accepted to their programs, and are asked to call those students. This program has had mixed success. It was developed without input from faculty, and rolled out in an email telling people they were expected to make calls, with no background as to what the program was about or what the calls should entail. As a result, some faculty are more likely to make the calls than others. Certain faculty get a list of 30-40 names each month that they are expected to call. In the Science department, the calling has been limited. The personalities in the department are such that most science faculty would rather do almost anything than cold-call a person they've never met. And when the calls are made, feedback has been that they are uncomfortable and sometimes confusing for the student as well. The department is working on alternatives, such as personalized postcards or emails that may be a better use of resources.

Once prospective students become Concordia students, it is important to keep them. Angela Muller, the Director of Freshman Advising and Retention, coordinates retention efforts. Retention has been a focus on campus for the past 5 years; before that it was generally assumed that students who came to campus came to stay, and not much thought was put into why some left. But an analysis of Concordia’s retention revealed that our retention rates were lower than would be expected of an institution of our size and type. So retention has gained a new priority on campus.

The first step in retention is having the Director of Retention also be the Director of Freshman Advising. Angela advises about 2/3 of the freshmen and incoming transfer students and works closely with the other freshman advisor so that advising is consistent and high quality. The advisors work closely with freshmen to develop four-year plans for graduation, and also to develop goals for their education and for their life.

After an analysis that athletes were the most at-risk group for retention, Angela worked closely with coaches to improve athlete retention. Mandatory study halls for some athletes, a better
system to get in-progress grades, and assorted social activities have all combined to raise the athlete retention rate significantly. As an example of unintended consequences, an initiative 5 years ago to streamline and simplify the financial aid process resulted in coaches being unable to offer larger scholarships for more talented athletes. This system has been adjusted somewhat, so that coaches have more flexibility in their aid packages, and now athletes are more satisfied with their circumstances and more likely to stay on campus.

Sophomores and transfer students have also been a focus of retention efforts. Programs like a Sophomore Tailgate party before a football game, a Program Night for sophomores to learn about the details of various programs, once-weekly lunch for transfer students with advisors and other program representatives, and early intense training on Banner for transfer students have all been successful in helping to retain these students.

Performa also provides an analysis of incoming students regarding the probability of their leaving Concordia. This analysis has proven to be accurate and useful, as Angela is able to work with coaches, Resident Assistants, First-Year Seminar instructors, the counseling office and the Academic Resource Center to focus on those students most at risk to leave the university. This focus allows for a better use of limited resources.

So far, retention efforts have been successful. Retention for freshmen has risen from 73% four years ago to 79% this year. For students who stay beyond their freshman year, the overall retention rate till their senior year is 88%. For those students who do leave Concordia, Angela undertakes exit interviews with every student who does attrition. She provides the data from these interviews to academic departments, the student life office, admissions, and any other office that may benefit from the data. While students leave for many reasons, the top ones are expenses, a desire to be closer to home, discomfort with the student life rules, and a feeling that Concordia is “too religious”. Overall, Angela sees that expectations are the primary indicator – if Concordia is what they thought college would be like, students stay; if it isn’t, they leave.

In order to improve retention, academic departments have stepped up training for advising, and have tried to implement a system to more equitably distribute advisees among advisors. Many have also initiated social events with students in the program, to introduce the newer students to the faculty and other students, and to build community in the program. My program has had
intermittent social events. It we need to be more intentional about it. My physics colleague and I used to sponsor monthly physics get-togethers that included dinner and discussions of interesting topics. A monthly schedule was too ambitious and we lost steam, but we need to get back to the idea, if only once per semester.

There is a tension between the admission and retention efforts. They are supervised by different cabinet officers, and have somewhat different goals. The Admissions Director told me that in his view, the ideal incoming class is one that allows Concordia to meet its budget without job losses or pay cuts. This view, while practical, can be short sighted if the students admitted are not good fits. The Retention Director focuses on fit, since students who are not good fits will not stay at the university. Because admissions and retention are separate efforts and do not work together, each subject to different pressures and goals, their efforts are not coordinated and do not always work well. Coordinating admissions and retention would probably be the most significant initiative Concordia could take to improve retention.