Strategies for Recruiting New Majors in English and World Languages

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Introduction

Declining numbers of majors have become a pressing concern for chairs of English and Foreign Language departments. With the celebration of STEM disciplines and students' and parents' concerns about the job prospects for humanities graduates, English and Foreign Language department chairs find themselves needing to fight for the health of our majors in ways that we did not need to in previous decades. And, of course, it becomes imperative to focus on recruiting because declines in the number of majors affect everything we do—our ability to run upper-level courses, hire new faculty, and make a strong case university resources.

It should be no surprise, then, that the June ADE-ADFL summer seminar session on Recruiting Majors was standing room only. Somewhere around 70 summer seminar participants squeezed into a classroom to discuss challenges that they faced in recruiting and retaining majors and to share strategies for reversing worrying trends. Lina Insana (Chair, Department of French and Italian) and Emily Todd (Chair, Department of English, Westfield State University) facilitated the discussion, which began first with an identification of the challenges departments face and then turned to a sharing of concrete suggestions about increasing the number of majors. It turned out to be an incredibly helpful session, as "the hive mind" came together to generate a long list of approaches to recruiting. Lina and Emily have transcribed the notes from the session and have organized them into challenges and solutions, in hopes that colleagues will find the ideas useful and will also share their own recruitment strategies.

(1) Figure out trends. Use information from the institutional research office and the admissions office to get an overview of changes of numbers of majors in the past 5 to 10 years or so. Here are questions you might ask:
- How many people begin in the major?
- How many new students join in their first, second, or even third year?
- What does retention look like in the major?
- How many of your majors are double majors?
● How have any new departments and majors at your institution affected your numbers?
● Do landmark events like study abroad or a particular required class prompt students to declare the major?
● How many applicants do you have for your major and what has the yield been in recent years?
The idea is to figure out what's really happening with numbers at your institution and then to use this information to devise the best recruitment strategy.

(2) Collaborate with the admissions office and marketing department. Work with the admissions office to update marketing materials and make sure admissions represents your major accurately and highlights the humanities generally as an important part of the institution's mission. (What do pictures on the general website, for example, say about the humanities?) Encourage faculty in your department to participate in recruitment efforts (open houses and other outreach efforts). Align departmental initiatives with institutional ones.

(3) Work with the undergraduate advising office. Consult regularly with undergraduate advising figures and mechanisms to establish and maintain clear channels of communication: visit them to tell them about your programs, provide them with syllabi so they talk about your courses in detail with (potential) students, use them to get informal student feedback about your courses/programs, etc.

(4) Make contact with the career center. Establish solid lines of communication with career counselors, making sure they know your mission and have a good sense of what your graduates go on to do in their professional lives. What certifications are required for these fields? Which internships should those students be pursuing? What skills should students expect to have mastered to be successful after graduation?

(5) Collaborate with other departments and programs. Establish innovative programs for majors outside the traditional Language/Literature path: professional schools, pre-education, etc. Are most of your majors primary/secondary (if this distinction exists)? Do you offer certificates/minors/other proficiency-oriented recognitions? Can these options provide opportunities for recruiting new students and/or retaining those majoring in other programs?

(6) Revise departmental website with a view toward recruiting and link website to social media initiatives. Place student and alumni profiles on departmental websites and use social media to keep in touch with alumni. Include information about
employment and alumni success; work with alumni/development office to get up-to-date information about alums.

(7) Make the departmental space welcoming to new students. How does the department look? What do the walls, bulletin boards, etc. convey to potential students and visitors? What do students learn about a department and its mission from the departmental space? Does the departmental space foster the development of intellectual and social communities among undergraduates?

(8) Use current students and alumni to help recruit. Ask students to participate in open house events and to reach out to accepted students over email or through social media. Invite alums to speak about your department at their former high schools or community colleges. Invite alums to job and professionalization fairs sponsored by the department.

(9) Use departmental events (poetry readings, performances, presentations) and publications (literary journals, newsletters) as recruiting tools. Publicize departmental-sponsored events at high schools and local community colleges, or consider sponsoring an event during accepted students’ weekend. Work with the admissions office to identify high schools that supply significant numbers of students to your institution and send literary journals or newsletters to the guidance counselors and teachers at those targeted schools.

(10) Remember the importance of internal recruitment. Make materials about your department available at events for undeclared students. Remember the importance of core courses and first-year courses in recruiting new majors. Consider developing gateway courses that will encourage students to take more courses in your departments, and encourage tenure-stream faculty to teach lower level course. Consider having the department chair send an email to the most promising students in first-year classes.