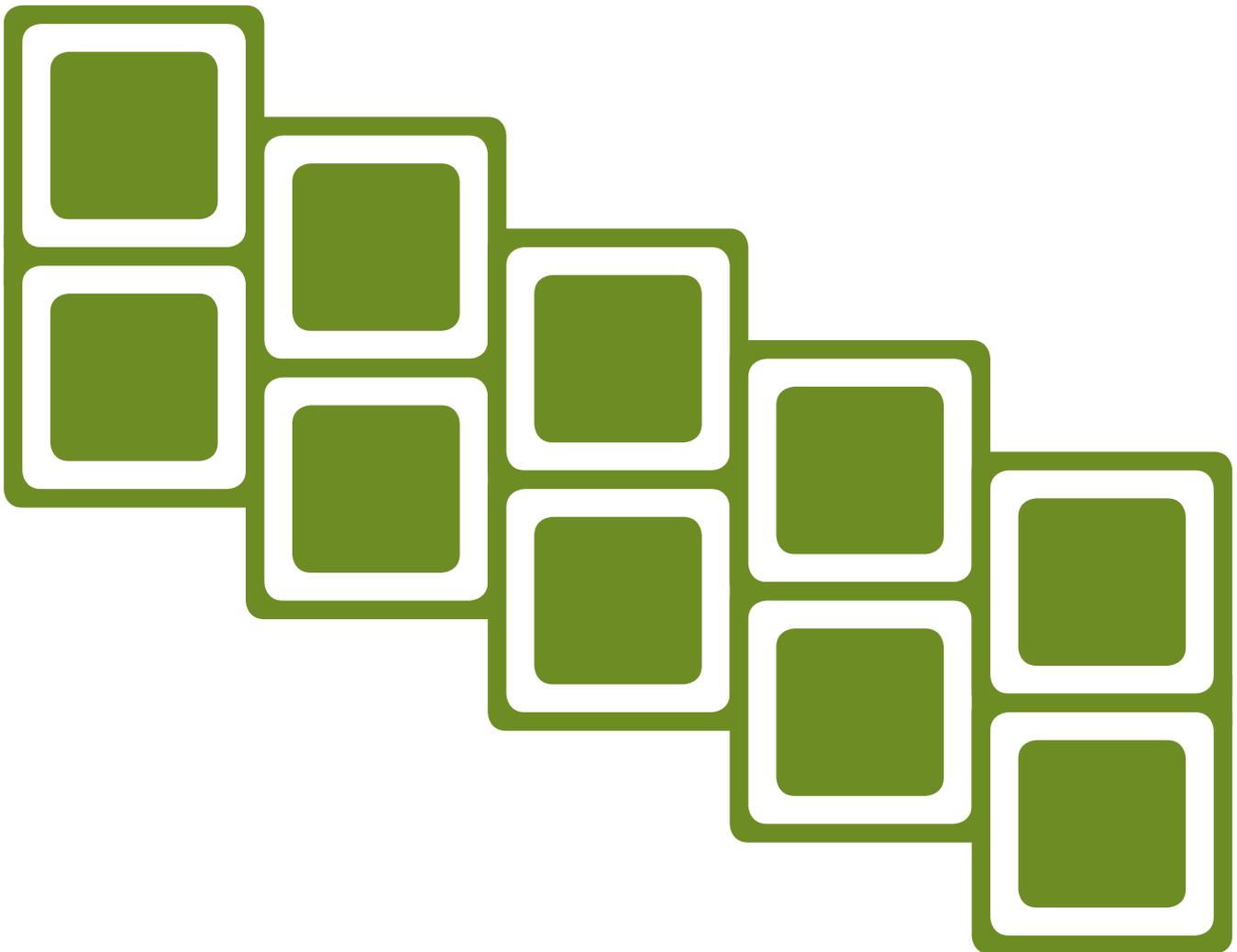


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It Takes an Institutional Village: Strategies to Enhance Summer Through Institutional Buy-In

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Abstract

Many institutions have undergone enrollment declines in recent summers, and administrators are looking at (a) reasons for the declines and (b) ways to rebound and continue growing summer enrollments (and revenues). This paper is designed to “create the future” by providing successful ideas and models for colleagues who wish to establish greater buy-in from members of their institutions and, ultimately, to increase summer revenue streams. Practices related to organizational culture and its influence on effective buy-in strategies are covered, including institutional ideologies, assumptions, values, and other defining attributes. The authors describe successful strategies, such as the development of a summer task force and networking with primary stakeholders on campus, which have served to enhance summer offerings and experiences on their respective campuses. Both public and private 4-year institutions are represented between the authors. Key takeaways will include identification of important constituent groups and recognition of other “summer” players; in addition, task force composition, strategies, and outcomes will be covered. It takes a village—and possibly an entire institution.

Introduction

Whether one is working at a public or private four-year university, the challenge to engage fellow constituents and increase summer credits remains the same. In the last decade, administrators in academe have become aware of downward enrollment shifts during summer terms. This may be due to changes in financial aid packaging, availability of jobs after a tightening of employment during the economic downturn, increasing rates of tuition, and other relevant factors. Institutions can be successful, however, by strategically developing a task force or by building relationships with primary stakeholders on their campuses. This paper will identify how two institutions increased summer credits using different models and strategies that fit their unique campus cultures.

As a mid-sized public research institution in the mid-Atlantic region, Old Dominion University (ODU) has taken steps to increase summer revenues over the coming decade. In 2012, administrators authorized a new position to oversee credit-based summer programming. Subsequently, the provost and deans lent their support to a restructured schedule, launched in Summer 2014. A summer website and email address were also set up. Progress. Still, many constituents at the university were not aware of the opportunities offered to resident and visiting students during the summer, and linkages among various offices had not yet been established. The new summer administrator—through connections with NAASS members—was able to tap into a wide network of campus groups when the provost and the vice president for student enrollment and engagement launched a task force to explore new possibilities for summer at ODU.

Members of the ODU task force included representatives from the faculty, Faculty Senate, Auxiliary Services, Student Affairs, Residence Life, Marketing, Teacher Education Services, Distance Learning, and Academic Affairs. Strategies for the task force aimed at increasing enrollment among ODU resident students, teachers, distance learners, and visitors. Possible incentives for ODU students related to discounts in tuition, housing, dining, parking, and other fees. Opportunities to work on campus were also explored. For faculty, flexible contracts (spring–summer and summer–fall) and flexibility in pay—rather than altogether cancelling classes—created an incentive to participation in summer programs. The actions taken among members of this task force included following up with representatives in each area who could effect change, including members of auxiliary services (discounts for parking and dining services) and those in facilities management (hiring students on summer work teams), thus keeping them on campus during the summer sessions. The follow-through on recommendations is ongoing. Each member of the task force—particularly the summer administrator—continually reminds representatives of university departments about the importance and value of summer enrollment. A key area of interest for the task force relates to the growing enrollment in online classes. Between 2009 and 2013, online course offerings increased by approximately 20% while registration in those classes increased by 80%. Clearly, this is an important element to examine for future summer schedules. Students are seeking flexible class schedules in the summer, and online or hybrid courses provide such flexibility. As a result, the addition of general education classes and upper-level degree completion options will experience significant expansion in the coming five years.

Marketing efforts at ODU were tailored to suit the diverse audiences they hoped to reach, including teachers, campus residents, off-campus students, distance learners, military-connected students, parents of students, and visitors. In order to reach such a broad audience, social media, digital ads, postcards, and the website were all integrated into the new campaign. In addition, advisors were seen as strong marketers for summer. These important members of the community helped to launch ODU's Finish in 4 campaign, which aims to ensure that students are on track to complete their education in four years. Major changes adopted as a result of the task force's work include the publication of a summer schedule in the fall; summer advising and registration coupled with that offered in the spring semester; development of student work teams in facilities management, which ensures that students remain on campus during the summer; and an increase in online course offerings.

Overall, buy-in among administrators, faculty, and staff across the institution contributed to a 3% growth—and nearly \$500,000 in additional revenues—in summer 2014 enrollments at the University. The task force was a key reason for this growth in summer courses, registrations, and revenues.

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As a small, private four-year university located in Northeast Pennsylvania, Misericordia University (MU) faces obstacles not always common to larger, public universities in that it is tuition driven and relies heavily on summer revenue to support its year-long initiatives. Convincing full-time faculty and other administrators of the importance of summer programming, as well as encouraging them to offer the courses students need in a format that is convenient, are typical hurdles faced by summer administrators. Therefore, to get “buy-in” to increase summer offerings and implement strategies that promote summer programming, a directive from the president can be the key.

At MU the president developed a summer task force comprised of top-level members of the university, including the president, vice president of academic affairs, deans, marketing director, IT director, director of adult education, and director of admissions. This was a temporary task force—to be in place for no longer than three years—charged with the specific assignment of increasing summer credits. In order to develop a strategy, however, the first step the task force addressed was to identify the issues, which were

- summer credit stagnation;
- an increase in off-campus requests;
- on-campus course cancellations due to low enrollment;
- an increase in the popularity of online courses; and
- a limited number of online course offerings.

The second step identified specific strategies to increase the number of credits and online offerings. Some of the strategies implemented included

- beginning summer advisement during spring advisement week;
- opening summer registration in the fall semester;
- developing additional online courses and recruiting and training qualified adjunct faculty;
- implementing an off-campus request procedure;
- developing a preferred summer employment procedure;
- promoting free or subsidized summer housing; and
- providing additional student and faculty resources.

One of the key strategies at MU was to begin the summer marketing campaign early in the fall semester. The campaign included targeted email blasts to undergraduate students, Facebook posts, and personalized letters mailed to the students' home addresses. Billboards, radio spots, and bus shelter advertisements were also used effectively. In advance of the spring advisement period, academic advisors were given an advisor packet, which included a list of summer courses, a fact sheet with frequently asked questions, and other pertinent information, such as tuition rates and start dates. Advisors also encouraged students to register for summer classes when registering for the spring semester. Early registrations allowed the summer staff to identify courses in jeopardy of cancellation or ones that required additional sections in a more timely manner. Additional faculty needs were also identified at this time, thus giving staff the opportunity to recruit and train faculty early on.

These strategies were in place for three years and at the end of the third year, the task force reported to the president that online offerings had increased by more than 65% and total summer credits by nearly 36%. Since the dissolution of the task force, an advisory council consisting of key departments—including marketing, admissions, financial aid, resident life, and the registrar—was formed. The purpose of the advisory council was to keep the focus and momentum on increasing summer credits. The advisory council also identified students' issues and provided suggestions concerning off-campus requests, online courses, and tutoring. Under the auspices of the advisory council, a new process to capture and approve off-campus requests was developed; student tutorials and faculty training were developed to address issues related to online learning; and a web-conferencing writing center was established. At the conclusion of the first year of the advisory council, it was reported that in the four years since the implementation of the task force

- online course offerings had increased by 74%;
- online credits had increased by 89%;
- overall summer credits had increased by 51%; and
- summer revenue had increased by 75%.

In addition to the increased revenue generated from the successful summer campaign, another important benefit to the institution was that the community was made aware of the importance of summer programming. In MU's case, such a campaign required a collaborated, concerted, and focused effort orchestrated by the university's president.

Common Themes

Several common themes and strategies for facilitating successful summer programming campaigns are evident across the two institutions:

- Campus buy-ins—specifically among members of the upper administration—were instrumental in increasing summer enrollment.
- Synergy among diverse members of the campus community is necessary for promoting the new programs.
- Both institutions recognized, and capitalized on, growing online course enrollment.
- Both institutions combined advising and registration for the spring and summer terms.
- Both institutions launched year-long marketing campaigns addressing summer opportunities.

Mrig and Sanaghan (2014) noted that although task forces and comparable ad hoc committees in higher education have not been fully explored among scholars, such groups may be quite effective in achieving specific institutional goals. More specifically, Mrig and Sanaghan make several recommendations for improving efficacy:

- Follow a clear purpose.
- Put the right people in the right seats.
- Manage the process in addition to the task.
- Follow through on recommendations.

These were valuable components of the work done by two institutions in enhancing their summer offerings and revenues. At both institutions, the purpose was clear: to grow summer numbers. And both institutions, with the help of their respective task forces, were successful!

References

Mrig, A. and Sanaghan, P. (July 2014). Eight Keys to Improving Task Forces and Committees in Higher Education. *Academic Impressions*.

Biographies

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