Recruitment and Retention Strategies: Keeping Students Involved on a Community College Campus

The Challenge for Community Colleges

There is a saying among student life professionals at two-year schools that the good students graduate and move on, while the more challenging personalities tend to keep coming back to school (and to your office) for years. Despite this, we know how important it is to find students who can be dependable leaders and volunteers. Most community colleges are concerned with finding ways to keep students coming back until they graduate. Retention is a hot topic, perhaps because the students we attract are diverse and busy with outside commitments. They have additional constraints that a traditional four-year college student may not have. For example, many of them have families and jobs that make considerable demands on their time. Therefore, to attract a student who is willing to give up some of their time is quite an undertaking. Let’s take a look at what works in recruiting and retaining students who volunteer to serve on our boards and clubs.

Recruitment: We Want to ATTRACT Quality and Quantity

It seems we can never have enough good, strong student leaders and volunteers to staff our events and serve on our boards. Community colleges have a different challenge than four-year schools because students are with us for only two years. It is also common for the community college student to register right before classes begin in the fall, which impacts our ability to acquire volunteers. In the typical four-year school model, it is customary to have all officers and volunteers in place well before the beginning of the fall semester. For these schools, recruitment efforts are underway during the spring semester. But at a two-year school, it is sometimes impossible to know in the spring who is going to be on your campus the following fall. There-
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Therefore, recruitment must take place quickly as the fall semester begins. So how do we identify potential leaders, and what can we do to expedite the process of recruiting them?

- **Meet with current leaders and faculty advisors.** Often there are new students of whom you are not aware, but your current leaders and faculty advisors can help you identify them. Basically, network and turn to the campus experts. This will normally yield several names of students you may not yet know.

- **Offer a leadership workshop day.** If you plan a leadership workshop, it is important to emphasize the workshop is open to everyone. Do this early in the fall semester and include flyers in orientation packets. Make it exciting and fun; offer food as a motivator. Make sure you have an energized training staff. The positive attitude of the staff and enthusiasm of the students who are assisting will really make the difference. Create innovative posters, table tents and any other publicity you can muster. Ask faculty members to announce the workshop in their classes or offer extra credit for attending. You want to get as many people to this kind of workshop as possible.

- **Keep your own list.** If a student comes to your office with a question or need, handle the situation appropriately, but do not miss the opportunity to ask the student if they are interested in being involved with your office and its programs. In this way, you can start your own list of potential volunteers and leaders.

- **Define goals to students.** It is important to explain your programming goals for the coming year. Let the students know their opinion counts and you need them to help you reach those goals. Sometimes a great program or event can help motivate a new student to become involved.

- **Give positive feedback.** For example, tell a student, “I notice that you are very good at organizing events for the Science Club. I wonder if you might be interested in serving on the Programming Board. We could use your skills.” This is a great way to encourage and recruit at the same time. Let them know their presence matters and you value their skills. In addition, you might tell a student, “We are going to the NACA National Convention in Boston and we could use your input on entertainment selection. Do you think you would like to work towards going on this trip?” Offering Convention attendance as a reward will likely bring positive results.

- **Show students they’ll have fun.** It is a myth that community colleges do not offer the same kind of fun activities as four-year schools. To break that misconception, you may have to spell it out for potential recruits with images of students having fun. Create a wall of great event photos. Such a visual display will show students at events, going places, smiling and having fun. Students will see for themselves that they can have a great time while volunteering. Generate excite-
ment and make students want to be part of the action.

- **Hold student life fairs.** This is a great way to recruit for clubs and programming boards. Take a few days each semester to allow student clubs to set up display tables and sign-up new members. Make sure there is a lot of action. Book entertainment, show videos, get your photo board up (see previous page), and do what you can to generate some noise. Have great giveaways that will attract students to the tables. Activity buzz and giveaways always attract attention.

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**Retention: We Want to KEEP Quality and Quantity**

Now that you have worked hard recruiting students to get involved, you must keep them interested and motivated. This is a special challenge for community colleges for several reasons. First, our students are very diverse in age and background. Second, they are busy with other life issues and many times find the added burden of college overwhelming. The key is to enhance the experience of going to college while being aware of their other commitments.

- **Be respectful of time.** Students need to know you are aware of their time restraints. This is especially important for the community college student. You must respect the fact that they are sometimes pulled in many directions with family, job and other outside influences. Make them aware you really understand. Be considerate of their schedules and ask when they have time to help. Then be honest with them about how much time you expect from them. Come to a consensus before you even begin the volunteer mission. You might be surprised to find the busiest students will become your most dependable volunteers and leaders.

- **Offer specific recognition.** Simple and specific recognition will motivate students to keep coming back to help. For example, you might say, "I really liked the way you organized this event. All the students had time to enjoy it, and that took thought and planning." You may also want to have student club members vote for a Student Leader of the Month. Post their photos and describe their accomplishments.

- **Encourage a student support system.** It is important to keep students from feeling isolated. In a community college there is a great deal of diversity and it is easy for any given student to feel isolated and leave the institution. You can help by giving students with similar backgrounds and interests opportunities to get together. For example, introduce a student who is a single mother to another person in similar circumstances and you might be helping her find a good support system. Let students of any particular age group know there are others involved who share their demographics with whom they can relate. Helping people connect with others similar to them will create support systems for students and help them stay with your programs. This also ties into mentoring and teamwork.

- **Provide opportunities for mentoring and teamwork.** Teaming up new volunteers and leaders with outgoing ones will establish continuity. This will benefit both the new volunteer and the person who has been with the organization for some time. They will form bonds that will encourage the new volunteer to continue participating in the organization. Feeling a sense of belonging is very important to retention.

- **Be optimistic, but share the pain.** If the going gets rough, smile! People like people who are positive and inspirational even when things get tough. When something goes wrong, be on the same side as the student. For example, if a student has an event that no one attends, own that defeat with the student. Consider this a way to help the student learn from the experience and claim some of the responsibility for what happened. You might say, "I am sorry we may have not gotten the word out as well as we should. How can we make this better next time?" By owning some of the responsibility, you take the burden of failure off the student leader. This helps them feel supported and understood. Consequently, they are much more likely to continue volunteering than if you had taken a negative approach and blamed them for the defeat.

- **Use a point system to offer rewards.** For every meeting attended, the student earns a point. For every event successfully executed, the student earns a point. Students who earn the most points, or those who accumulate a certain number of points, earn a reward. Student clubs can also earn points toward getting more funding for next year's budget. Rewards might include some type of travel, such as conference attendance or an educational trip.

**Our Greatest Asset, Our Most Challenging Resource**

At community colleges, we realize that students are our greatest asset and our most challenging resource to manage. However, with some care and thought, we can find potential leaders and keep them coming back. We can recruit new leaders by networking, setting up workshops, letting students know what we do, keeping our own list of potential volunteers and offering appropriate motivation. To keep those students, we can offer mentoring, positive feedback, fun giveaways, appropriate support and a point system through which students earn rewards. Sometimes, all it takes is a little extra focus to develop our own unique solutions.

**About the Author**

**Nina Mulé Lyons** is director of Student Life at Community College of Allegheny County/North Campus (PA). She has more than 20 years experience in the field of student activities. She holds a master's degree in training and organizational development and undergraduate degrees in management and psychology, all from La Roche College in Western Pennsylvania.