What It Takes To Attract Students to a CTE Offering

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NSUWorks Citation
Hudnett, Richard, "What It Takes To Attract Students to a CTE Offering" (2016). Fischler College of Education: Student Articles. 5.
https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_stuarticles/5

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There are countless reasons why a prospective student looking at career/technical education (CTE) might want to only pursue a certification and or training that prepares them for a specific job or task. Although a prospective CTE student might benefit from learning about other topics related to their specified field of interest, those areas are often unaligned with their goals and objectives, which means they are often less interested in exploring such opportunities.

Three such commonly perceived major benefits of a CTE that are unaligned with gaining additional unrelated knowledge and increasing one’s course load include:

1. CTE programs are focused and concentrated
2. CTE programs represent the greatest perceived value and recognition within a respective field
3. CTE programs can be completed within a reasonable amount of time

Prospective undergraduate degree-seeking students, on the other hand, are often aware they must complete required general education courses that are unrelated to their major, that their degree is either a stepping stone to something else or represents a broad spectrum of perceptions and values within their respective fields, and that it can only be completed within an ongoing semester-based time frame. The purpose and population of prospective students pursuing a CTE program compared to an undergraduate degree are tremendously different. Moreover, what attracts and entices one prospective student to inquire, apply and enroll will not likely attract the other.

Universities that are already recognized by prospective students as quality providers of postsecondary degrees and are expanding educational offerings to include CTE courses need to develop an effective marketing strategy that helps generate awareness about these future plans. It is highly likely that such a marketing strategy will push the institution to leverage its existing brand recognition in various capacities, while reimagining existing recruitment techniques that have proven to be successful for its existing undergraduate degree program offerings. However, an approach that relies too heavily on these two components can actually deter its targeted prospective CTE students from inquiring, applying...
and ultimately enrolling.

As such, it’s important for a university to carefully consider the risks associated with leveraging its existing brand and recruitment strategies before implementing them.

The Risk of Leveraging the Existing Brand

A university that builds its brand to be recognized as a quality provider of higher education degrees primarily appeals to a very distinct market of prospective students. Similarly, the perception of the university by its future prospective CTE students—regardless of the accuracy of the perception—will most likely be correlated with the university’s established reputation and its collective attributes (such as those associated with its degree offerings).

These assumptions could paint the way a prospective CTE student thinks about the university in a range of ways; it can possibly create misnomers about the tuition rate, create confusion about the number of available course format options, and alter the way prospective students think about the application, admission and enrolment processes.

This presents a major challenge for a university attempting to market its CTE certificates because it must ensure that prospective students can distinguish the differences between a degree and a certificate, and aren’t deterred from inquiring, applying and ultimately enrolling. The possible risk is that these prospective students fail to inquire or apply because they falsely assume the university’s two programs have similar attributes, such as a high tuition rate or a lengthy enrollment process.

In addition to a very strong possibility that a university’s prospective CTE students assume all of its program offerings have similar attributes, a university’s marketing material can often contribute to their misguided belief if it highlights the university’s brand first and CTE offerings second. Usually, institutions will highlight their brand first in marketing materials because they feel the university’s brand will be the attention-grabber for its target audience, and that brand will lead the prospective students to think of them as a legitimate source of career/technical training. However, two commonly overlooked risks associated with this include:

1. This particular strategy only builds upon the misperception by prospective CTE students that both programs have equal attributes
2. It catches the attention of prospective students seeking higher educational degrees and not CTE

The primary purpose of the marketing material should be to first grab the attention of the targeted prospective students interested in the CTE training and second to validate these offerings with the university’s brand

The Risk of Relying on Past Recruitment Techniques

One of the most commonly used recruitment techniques to attract prospective students for an academic degree are information sessions. Universities invite and encourage prospective students to attend information sessions in order to learn about the university, its admission process and how they can navigate its enrollment process. For CTE programs, though, universities might consider providing how-to workshops rather than information sessions. Unlike the participants that attend a university’s information session and already believe in the quality of education it provides, prospective students for a new CTE offering may not have the same level of trust because the school isn’t recognized for such programs. By offering a half-day how-to workshop during which an expert in the field presents on one of the key components within a technical career, the institution can help validate the program’s quality.

In addition to adjusting a university’s promotional material in order to catch the attention of its prospective CTE students, it should also be competitively priced and recruiters for the program should have extensive knowledge about the profession as well as the academic offerings. In an ideal recruitment scenario, the instructors—considered to be the CTE experts—should be actively involved in the recruitment efforts and among the key points of contact for prospective students to get additional information. Moreover, all of the pre-existing assumptions about what recruitment strategies work best and the value an established university’s brand provides technical career students should be carefully evaluated and challenged to insure such risks are minimized.