

Increasing Enrollment in Academic Enrichment Programs with New Communication Strategies



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Project Background and Goals

- **Educational inequity** refers to the extent to which students' education is based on their social economic status. Although a number of factors contribute to inequities in education, one key factor is property taxes. Typically, higher income communities have higher funding for their public schools because schools are paid for with property taxes, while lower income communities have less.
- **While working** at a local after-school enrichment program in Chapel Hill designed to compensate for educational inequities, I noticed that the program was not fully enrolled. I also noticed that the program mailed brochures as their primary means of communication with prospective parents. Given my background in public relations, these two observations influenced my summer research question: What are the communication strategies of fully enrolled academic enrichment programs?
- **In summer 2009** I worked at Student U in Durham, a fully enrolled enrichment program and recipient of the 2009 Light Up Durham's "It's Cool to Care" award, to learn more about its communications strategies for recruiting eligible students.
- **At Student U**, my goals were to:
 - > 1. Identify the communication or advertisement techniques that notified parents and the local community about Student U
 - > 2. Identify ways that smaller enrichments programs could replicate these techniques to notify parents about their academic enrichment programs

Findings

- **Student U notified parents** about the program through school guidance counselors. The guidance counselors selected students they thought fit the Student U profile, notified the parents about their student's selection, and asked the parents to complete an application for the student. Student U used various forms of communication to interact with parents who had students enrolled in the program. Parents received weekly phone calls and emails from their student's grade head and personal advisor updating them on their student's academic progress throughout the summer. Parents attended frequent meetings held by the director that allowed parents to voice their opinions and concerns for upcoming Student U events. The summer culminated with a parent-focused event in which students sang and danced, displayed their visual art, and read speeches.
- **Student U attracted students** to the organization through the guidance counselor process. Directors directly communicated with students through forums in which students voiced ways to improve the organization for future students. Students appreciated getting to choose their elective classes.
- **Student U attracted student teachers** through local university personnel, recruitment events, and flyers. Student U directors notified local university education departments about the program. Advisors in academic departments urged their students to apply online to work at Student U. Members of the Student U leadership team attended on-campus events and invited students to apply for the teaching internship online. The leadership team also posted flyers on local campuses urging college students to apply on-line. College students who worked at Student U received college transfer course credit at their universities.
- **Local enrichment programs can replicate** these communication techniques by incorporating all aspects of the community, locating university volunteers, requesting parent input, and valuing student opinion. Programs should interact with public schools, local businesses, and universities to attract parents to the program. When other reputable sources such as guidance counselors refer parents to the program parents seem to have confidence in the program's claims to help their students. By contacting local universities' education and public service departments local enrichment programs can possibly increase their student to faculty ratios and number of qualified un-paid faculty members. Requesting input from the parents seems to give parents a stake in the program and dedication to their students' attendance. Having students choose their classes and give their opinions of the program allows them to take control of their education, feel a connection to the program, and commit to attending the program.