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Student recruitment: planning visit days

Judy Robertson

There is a good deal of hand wringing about how to encourage girls to study STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) at university. The WISE Campaign for women in science and engineering laments (with admirable candour): “Nothing has worked! Despite more than 30 years of focus on ‘enthusing, fascinating or encouraging’ girls into STEM, there has been NO CHANGE in the proportion of girls choosing physics A-level” (WISE PLM).

They recommend a fresh approach which doesn’t try to change girls to fit with the world of science, but rather presents STEM subjects as stepping stones into careers for “people like me”. They note that one-off interventions which are meant to excite people about science don’t generally work to change minds about careers and make some rather scathing remarks about “untrained and narrowly prepared speakers” whose visits to schools might do more harm than good. They disapprove of science competitions too, on the grounds that competition isn’t necessarily appealing to girls who might prefer more co-operative activities.

Given that girls outperform boys at school generally, including in STEM subjects, the problem is persuading girls to apply for STEM courses when they have the qualifications to study any number of courses which could lead to careers that they might consider more alluring or rewarding. This recipe focuses on a later stage of

the “leaky pipeline” – how to make sure that women (or applicants from minority groups) choose your course rather than other courses at different universities. How to get women to apply in the first place is a mystery we will leave to another time.

I organised applicant visit days for school students to a computer science department at a Scottish university for many years. These events are for people who have applied to a university course and have been accepted (conditionally upon their exam results), but are still trying to decide which university to choose. I used to love this role, but I was very fussy about doing it in a particular way. For me, the main aim is to give applicants the sense that “this is a place for people like me”. Your job is to help them to see your department as somewhere that they would fit in.

And if you believe your department is not really a place where women do fit in then make it so! You have a whole book of recipes here to help you.

Ingredients

- Ability to remember what it is like to choose a university course.
- Ability to see your department with fresh eyes.
- Willingness to ignore academic pride and prestige.

Method

1. Match up your applicants with a compatible student ambassador.

Have a range of ambassadors such as those who are familiar with local school systems as pupils or parents, or international students, mature students, or those who have studied at FE (further education) colleges to match the spectrum of applicants.

2. Make your applicants feel comfortable.

It's a good idea to involve first or second year students in planning applicant visit days, because they remember what it was like to visit for the first time – what they were worried about and what they enjoyed. Select staff and student helpers for their warmth, friendliness and ability to relate to applicants' backgrounds (this isn't an opportunity to impress with your most brilliant peacock researchers). If your department has a policy by which everyone must help at open days to spread the workload (an excellent way for the department to shoot itself in the foot as not everyone is suited to this task) your head of department can no doubt be creative in assigning alternative tasks to people who are more at ease lurking in their offices.

3. Make the environment comfortable too. Pay attention to the physical space you bring applicants to. I remember

being dragged around grey, windowless basements known as the machine halls to look at Sun Microsystems servers when I was applying for a computer science degree place. It may have impressed the geekier applicants but it literally left me cold because the air conditioning was on full blast. It wasn't a place I wanted to spend time (and although in fact I did study on that course I spent as little time as possible in those labs throughout my degree).

Seemingly little details such as the posters on the wall, or the T-shirts worn by helpers cue people about whether they would fit in within an environment. While the (mostly male) applicants around me might have enjoyed discussing their Red Dwarf T-shirts with the host PhD students, I felt like an outsider as I had never watched the show. It turns out it's not just me – my experience on the open day relates to a of sense ambient belonging, which “includes fit with the material (e.g. physical objects) and structural (e.g. layout) components of an environment along with a sense of fit with the people who are imagined to occupy that environment” (Cheryan et al., 2009). Women typically feel less comfortable in environments which broadcast masculinity.

4. **Choose your open day speakers carefully.** Make sure you have seen them speak before so you know that they are capable of being simultaneously inspiring and comprehensible. Vet them first so you can predict whether they will suddenly go off on an alarming elitist rant about accepting only the highest calibre of student. Regardless of your actual selection policy, the point is that you're trying to persuade the audience members to choose your department and invoking brilliance often evokes stereotype threat for those who don't match the stereotype profile (Cheryan et al., 2009). Also, just to make your task of finding staff to help extra hard, the WISE report cautions against relying too much on role models who are too perfect, because young people may feel: "I could never be that good". Why not choose some of your less eccentric undergraduate students to speak? The applicants are probably more interested in finding out the sorts of things they will learn in their first year than what they might eventually do if they ever become a research student. They may find it easier to relate to a student who is closer to them in age or career stage.
5. **Focus on how great your subject is, and the opportunities it will bring.** The WISE report notes that girls are less inclined to study a subject because they enjoy it or they are good at it – they would prefer to know how they can use it in their future. So make sure that girls know what career opportunities studying a STEM subject might bring, and also that it is important to keep their options open.
6. **Reach out to families too.** Parents are very influential in career choices. In particular, WISE suggests that it would be effective to discuss the range of career opportunities relating to a subject with mothers so that they in turn influence their daughters. After all, why would a parent want their daughter to work in a world where she feels she does not belong?



At the University of Edinburgh, Informatics, Engineering and Maths all match their applicants with ambassadors who welcome them and their questions via email.

Cook's tip

One of the reasons I feel so passionate about this is my own applicant visit experience (see Method step 3), and that in some respects I felt an outsider for the four years of my course. But I did spend a lot of time teasing members of the in-group who I made friends with about their nerdery!

Warning

It is not a good idea to make a big issue out of gender – don't mention it unless someone brings it up as a concern. There is no point in worrying applicants about issues which they may not have yet encountered. And at the same time, if it is raised, have an honest and constructive reply ready.