

The Improvement of Recruiting and Retention in the University Percussion Studio

By Tracy Wiggins

This article is presented by the PAS University Pedagogy Committee subcommittee on Recruiting and Retention. This article was written in collaboration with Justin Alexander, Ben Miller, William Moersch, Dennis Rogers, Patrick Roulet and Susan Martin-Tariq.

Recruiting and retention. These two “R” words are all the buzz on college campuses these days. One is hard pressed to go to any meetings on campus without these words coming up in some fashion. In a time where school funding seems to be constantly under attack from legislatures these words continually come up as key points for continuing to secure funding for institutions. The music programs and percussion teachers are not immune to the pressures to increase numbers in their programs (usually without the financial support increasing along with the increased numbers). To that end the University Pedagogy Committee started a conversation on ways to improve the recruiting and retention of students in today’s percussion programs. During this conversation several key themes began to develop.

One of the first keys to any form of recruiting is getting the names of students. This can be done in many ways but some of the most popular are All-State and All-District membership rosters, an inquiry form on the music departments webpage and inviting potential students onto a programs Facebook page. Offering clinics at honor bands and various schools is a key way to build a relationship with directors. Hangouts and Skype are also effective ways to work with programs while reducing the expense (typically uncovered by the program) of travel to a school.

Maintaining a presence on the internet is also important to recruiting today's students. Many students spend a large portion of their time on various sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Vine* and more. These sites are how students interact with each other, their families and the world of music. Programs today need to maintain a strong (and up to date) presence in at least some of these internet areas. A good website with the necessary information, as well as pictures and audio/video recordings is often a student's first exposure to a program. This could lead them to look for more information on Facebook and especially *YouTube*. Live streaming percussion ensemble concerts and recitals is also a tool that is being utilized by many programs. The more information that can be found on a program the stronger the program will appear to today's students.

It is also important to have up to date printed materials that can easily be sent to students. Several programs have now started to move to digital flyers and brochures to reduce printing and mailing costs. This also allows more frequent updating and customization of the brochure. One idea being utilized effectively is to have links imbedded into various parts of the brochure that can take students to specific videos, sounds or websites. This interactivity can be a very useful tool for recruiting today's students as they are very comfortable with interaction via email and the internet.

The directors themselves are many times the key to getting the students. One of the first people a potential music major will talk to about college choices is their high school director. If the director has a good working relationship with a particular teacher or program they will have a tendency to recommend that program to students.

The students and alumni of a program can be one of the best ways to collect names for the recruiting list. When students are happy with the program they are in, they have a tendency to tell other students about it. If they are excited they want to maintain that excitement by bringing in even more high quality students to continue the growth. Some schools will begin building their recruiting lists based on recommendations of names from the current students. Many programs also have strong groups of alumni who are in the field as both performers and teachers. This can help to get a program into the minds of potential students as one where they can also create their own career path.

Following up with a student after the audition is vital. Many times the period of time between when an audition is completed and when a student officially hears from a school can be quite long. By continuing to check in with the student periodically the teacher keeps their program on the mind of the student. This interaction can also allow the teacher to answer questions if the student starts to look more strongly at other programs.

Hosting a percussion event (or several!) can be a great way to get both students and directors onto your campus. Many programs host marching percussion camps, summer music camps, percussion festivals and more on an annual basis. These allow the teacher to meet students and talk to them about the program as well as allowing them to highlight various aspects of the school.

When students contact a school for information it is important to be sure they get a very quick response. The teacher wants to be sure they have as much information as possible about the program as well as the audition and admissions process. They need to be sure that the website is up to date and includes all of the audition requirements, but also as much information about the program as is possible as well. They can

also use Facebook and Twitter to keep people update on the development of the program. A good goal is to try to not go over a 2-3 weeks without contacting potential students.

Personal attention to the students being recruited is a high priority for all involved. In a day when college choices are numerous it is important for a teacher to forge a personal relationship with a student during the recruiting process. This is done in many ways but one of the most common is inviting the student to spend a day at the campus. This usually involves attending some classes, sitting in on some rehearsals and quite often a free lesson with the teacher. This is a way for the student to really get a view of what it would be like to attend a school and to see if they can imagine themselves fitting in there. The lesson is important for the teacher to get an idea of what working with a student would be like but the same also holds true for the student. It is their chance to see what their strengths and weaknesses might be and to see how the teacher goes about addressing these areas.

When a student comes to visit it is VERY important to give them some personal time. Have them tour the facilities, meet students, watch groups, and get a lesson so they can really experience what a school has to offer. This is very different than the model involved in many music school auditions. The student comes in, warms up, plays and then leaves without really getting to spend any time with the teacher or studio members. This may be because of the number of students that audition at a lot of these programs but in that case maybe there is a flaw in the audition system. It is difficult to feel like you really know as much as you would like to about a student based off of a 15-30 minute audition. As teachers one should want to know WHO they are, not just WHAT they can do. It can be beneficial to make an effort to put more emphasis on students auditioning on non-audition days when they can come and really experience the program. It can also be useful to make sure there is some time allotted to meet with parents during the audition day as well. Parents will often have many questions about the school, equipment needs, admissions process and more that students will not think to ask.

Look to the model of college athletics recruiting. There, potential athletes have multiple contacts with coaches and administrators. They tour the facilities. They attend games etc. The school goes out of their way to make the student feel wanted. It takes time and it takes effort. That should be a music schools goal as well. This is a HUGE life changing decision for them and students need to have as much information as possible before making this decision.

All students want to feel wanted by the programs they are looking at attending. And all teachers want their programs to be places students want to attend. These goals can go together hand in hand.

Retention is the second big “R” in collegiate circles today. It is also one that can be very difficult to deal with. There are many factors to student retention including their academic success, involvement in campus activities, ability to pay for school, familial support, happiness with the school or town itself just to name a few. Many schools now use a combination of incoming students, retention between the first and second years and a four or five year graduation rate to judge the success of a program. Many universities have in place systems to help identify students that might be “at risk” in their class work to help teachers find a way to guide through successfully. Most often this comes from an office on campus that is tasked with academic support for students. Many schools allow teachers to submit to this office a report on a student that will then lead to their being contacted by an academic counselor. This counselor will work with the student to set up visits to a writing center, meetings with tutors and possibly even meetings with the professor.

Most music programs do not have the resources to have a dedicated academic support specialist but many do an excellent job of facilitating communication between advisors, studio teachers and academic teachers within the department to identify students that might be struggling with the coursework. Tutoring in music theory and history are very commonplace among university music departments now. One of the main keys to retention in a percussion program (much like recruiting) is the students themselves. The

members of the studio can create an environment of support; guidance and friendship that can be useful for making students feel comfortable in their new academic environment.

Many programs have successfully used mentoring within their studios where they will assign a new student to an older (successful!) student. This older student can help guide them in ways such as how and when to practice, help with early music classes in the degree program, being a sounding board when doubts about the ability to be successful in this degree set in and more. This mentor can this also be a connecting link between the teacher and the new student to keep the teacher apprised of any concerns that might start to develop. Other programs have a second studio class meeting specifically for freshman. This class can cover the basic topics of how to succeed as a percussion major but can also serve as group lessons to introduce the fundamental technique concepts to all new students at one time. In this way the students can start to see each other play and see what they individually may need to improve compared to their colleagues. This can be particularly effective in large programs where some of the teaching of younger students may be handled by graduate students as a way for freshman to still meet with the professor on a weekly basis.

Recruiting and retention are key points that are going to continue to grow in importance for all university instructors. As schools deal with increasing competition combined with decreasing budgets it is important for every program to continue to look for ways to find and keep the best students available.

The PAS University Pedagogy Committee promotes and enhances the exploration, improvement, elevation, and facilitation of the craft of percussion at every level of college teaching.

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