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A Redesigned Engagement and Recruitment Strategy for Engineering Technology Programs at a Regional Campus

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Abstract

While enrollment in engineering programs is generally strong nationwide, maintaining or increasing enrollment in Engineering Technology programs at smaller regional campuses can be challenging. The problem appears to be multi-faceted, with the rising cost of education and a strong regional job market two of the likely factors that are keeping students from pursuing a college education. This paper presents a summary of the initial work done at a Statewide location of a large national university to redesign how we engage and recruit students from our surrounding counties. Our eventual goal in redesigning the processes is to leverage our ability to connect directly with local high schools, prospective students, and the parents of prospective students. In the paper, we briefly describe our prior recruitment activities, provide an overview of our newly-developed recruitment model and the philosophy that underpins our redesigned strategy for outreach and recruitment as a whole, and present an initial review of data that are being collected for assessing the effectiveness of our efforts. The central element of this initial work is the redesigned recruitment event aimed at helping us better connect with prospective students. The event emphasizes the importance of campus visits by local high school students, informative hands-on activities, and relationship-building with local high school staff and administrators. The goal of this initial work is to test the approach of direct engagement and to gauge interest in our programs, our location, and overall interest in attending college for the students who participate in the events. This initial assessment will in turn inform us how to continue to improve the overall strategy over the next two to four years.

Introduction

As the higher education landscape continues its rapid evolution, administrators, faculty, and support staff must continue to evaluate this changing landscape in order to remain relevant. Many colleges and universities have responded to the changes with strategic initiatives that aim to influence enrollment through student-centered amenities and curriculum rationalization. While such strategic initiatives are possible at large institutions, small satellite campuses often have little influence over strategic decisions. Other challenges stem from the fact that the number of prospective students is more or less limited to a geographic region that possess distinct industrial and demographic profiles, meaning that what may work for one geographic region may not work for another. However, some clear advantages exist compared to large

regional or national universities. One such advantage is that it is easier to engage with potential students directly.

Direct engagement with a university and its faculty is considered to be an important aspect of higher education outreach efforts [1]. This is no secret, and many recruiting efforts that include direct engagement also include contact with faculty. It is also not uncommon for outreach and recruitment initiatives to include an educational component related to faculty expertise and degree programs offered [2], or to provide hands-on experiences for students attending the events [3]. However, these events have often required a significant amount of time and energy, and it is unclear how they might contribute to increased enrollment. This may not be a primary concern at larger regional or national institutions, but direct recruitment does create the opportunity to significantly increase enrollment at a smaller campus with limited programs to offer. After engaging in several large events over the past several years with mixed results, it was determined that a new approach to direct recruitment was needed.

In this paper we present our initial work toward developing an effective, comprehensive, and sustainable engagement and recruitment strategy. The cornerstone of the strategy is hosting events that draw local high school students to campus, where they participate in hands-on activities intended to relate the subject matter (drawn from the degree programs offered at the location) to potential careers, and where they are able to learn about the application and financial aid processes for the location. These new outreach events are related to our prior events in some ways, but are distinct in that the emphasis now is on what is sustainable in terms of faculty and staff resources and on what will reach the greatest number of students. Although this work is focused on recruitment and on building awareness of our programs, the engagement strategy we have conceptualized spans the entire life-cycle of a student from their introduction to the location, to matriculation, to degree completion.

Background

The location has resided in South Bend, Indiana since 1984, and offers seven bachelor degree programs. The location initially offered evening programs but switched to primarily daytime delivery for the two largest degree programs in 2010, and enrollment now is predominantly students seeking bachelor's degrees. The six primary degree programs offered at the location are Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET), Electrical Engineering Technology (EET), Industrial Engineering Technology (IET), Robotics Engineering Technology (RoET), Supply Chain Management Technology (SCMT), and Organizational Leadership (OL). A general Engineering Technology (ET) degree program and various certificate programs are also offered. Enrollment at the location has generally been declining over the past few years after a mild surge around 2008. This surge corresponds both to the global financial crisis that began in 2008 and the maturation of previous recruiting efforts that have since faded. The decline is in contrast to an overall higher enrollment trend for Mechanical Engineering (ME), Electrical Engineering (EE), and Industrial Engineering (IE) programs across the nation (Figure 1). This decline is also counter to regional trends for similar degree programs. Figure 2 presents total enrollment for the location alongside comparison enrollments from other institutions and programs. The comparison for Peer represents total enrollments for a sister location within the same institution which offers many of the same degree programs. The comparison for Parent represents total

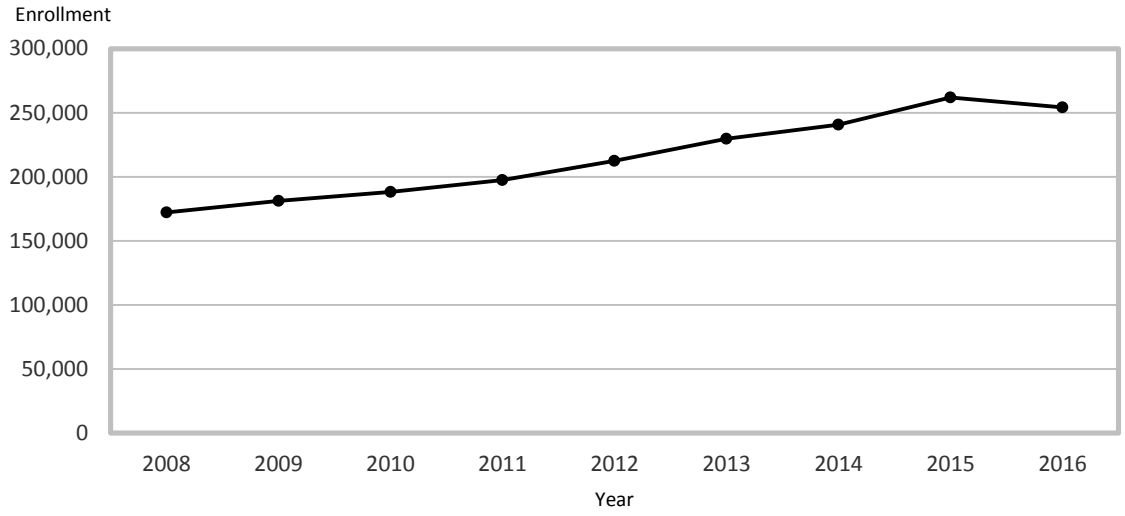

Figure 1 – National Enrollment Trend (Full-Time ME, EE, and IE) [4]

enrollments for parent college and includes all degree programs of the college. The comparison for Competitor represents enrollments for three degree programs of a larger institution within the same region as our location. The degree programs used in the comparison are Mechanical Engineering Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology, Industrial Engineering Technology, which represent the majority of the enrollments at our institution.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the underlying motivation for our efforts to create a sustainable recruiting process for our location. While enrollments are generally trending higher for similar

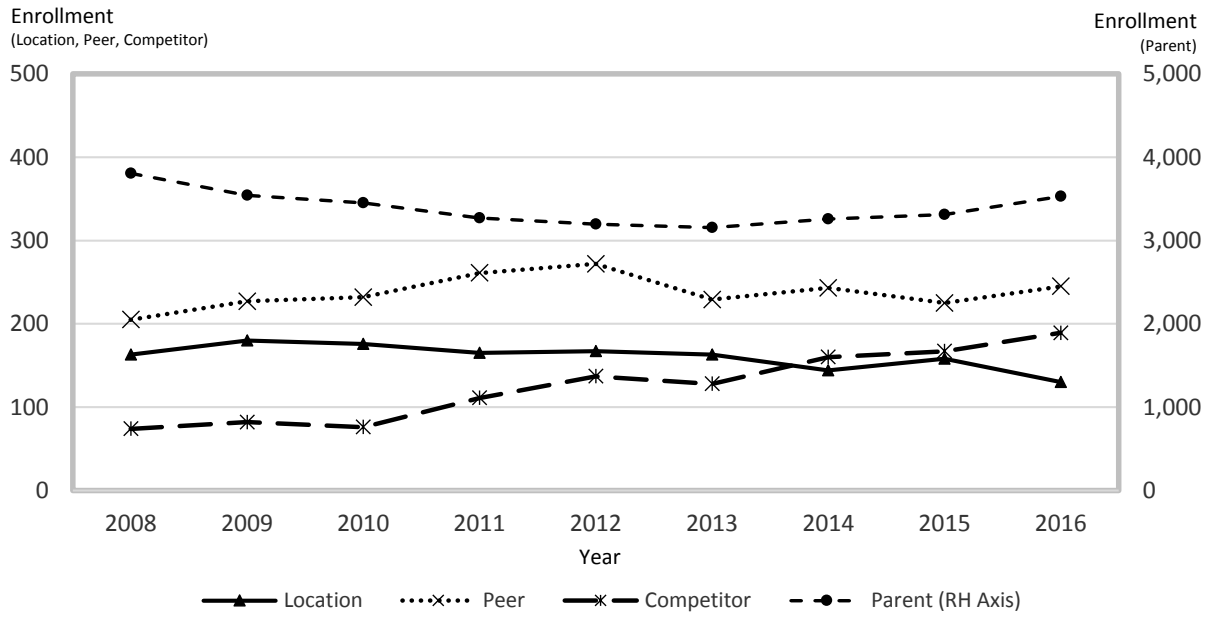

Figure 2 – Enrollment Trends vs. Peer, Competitor, and Parent Institution [6]

programs both regionally and nationally, enrollments at our location are stagnant or trending downward. Several theories have been offered as to why this may be the case, including the remarkably low unemployment rate of 2.5% observed in the region [5]. Nevertheless, because nearly all of our students come from an easily defined geographical area, it is incumbent upon the administration and faculty to act in response to these enrollment challenges. We believe the best course of action is to develop an engagement strategy that is designed to connect with local high school teachers and administrators, inform prospective students on the programs of study available at our location, and provide opportunities for prospective students to engage with faculty. Any engagement strategy that accomplishes these goals and proves to be sustainable on a year-over-year basis is very likely to improve enrollment in the short run.

Past Engagement Efforts

Engagement efforts have historically been undertaken on a small scale or on an individual basis. The Student Services Coordinator (SSC) typically visits local high schools during the fall semester to connect with guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators from local high schools. These visits coincide with the typical recruiting cycle. Other outreach and recruiting events conducted by the location consist of summer camps, hosting students on-site at so-called Showcase Days, and hosting a day-long Engineering Technology Conference [7] for high-school students. Several individual faculty members have also made periodic visits to local high schools based on personal relationships with individual teachers. Table 1 summarizes the key points of prior engagement initiatives, and their expected impact in terms of the number of students that a faculty member or administrator was able to connect with.

Engagement Model

In an effort to firmly establish sustainable engagement and recruiting processes, we have developed an Engagement Model to serve as a basis for understanding how the location connects with a student from the first point of contact until graduation. The model is depicted in Figure 3, and our initial efforts are geared toward increasing awareness of our location. We believe awareness of the location is of paramount importance not only in recruiting, but also in understanding how we might best connect with potential students. Survey results show that less than half of high school students are aware that they can pursue a degree from the parent university locally.

The engagement model depicts the general sequence of events from awareness, to application and enrollment, on through to graduation. While the processes of tracking applications and engaging with students is quite streamlined, we currently have no defined processes or best

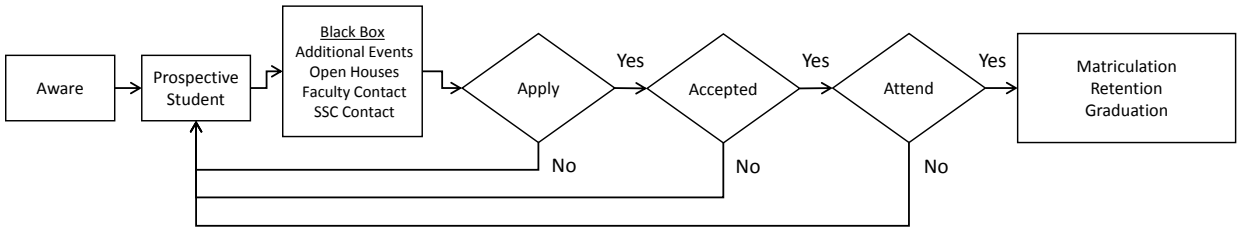

Figure 3 – Engagement Model

Table 1 – Past Recruitment & Engagement Events

Initiative	Purpose	Annual Connections	Description
Showcase Days	Awareness	~ 20	Informational session for prospective students. Arranged by Student Services Coordinator.
Go-Kart Camp	Outreach	~ 24-32	3-Day Summer camp focusing on electrical vehicles. Arranged by a single faculty member.
Engineering Technology Conference	Outreach	~ 100-110 Max.	Day-long, multi-discipline event centering on a themed activity. Arranged by administrators. Faculty participation required.
High School Classroom Visits	Awareness	~ 100	Faculty visits to local schools. Typically arranged by individual faculty members. Numbers can vary greatly depending on the size of the high school.
College Fairs	Awareness	~100 Annually	Events hosted at local high schools where many colleges can visit to interact with students.
High School Counselor Visits	Outreach	~ 10-15	Direct visits by Student Services Coordinator with high school guidance counselors to make them aware of the programs offered locally.

practices for connecting with students who we know are aware of our location and may be interested in our programs. Furthermore, we are uncertain as to how best to connect with such students.

We have applied the term “black box” to this in-between phase spanning from when a student becomes aware of the location until the time of application. We do know that some percentage of students that become aware of the location will indeed apply and attend. There is anecdotal evidence that several current students were drawn to the location because of an outreach event, but we do not have records to validate how many. Our efforts are to establish a program that builds awareness of our location in students from local high schools through our Techie Friday events that is described in the following section. We anticipate that in gathering information about our recruiting events, we will gain a greater awareness of how we might best connect with these black box students.

The importance of building awareness in students from local high schools would be difficult to overstate. Approximately 75% of new students over the past three years attended high school at one of 23 local schools, and 65% attended one of 13 local schools. This reinforces the notion that our student population will primarily come from a defined region. Before focusing any recruitment effort outside of our established geographic area, we must first ensure that we are seizing opportunities that we currently have within this area. Connecting with students, teachers, and counselors from high schools in this area is essential so that students have a clear picture of who we are.

We believe awareness events are gateways to further meaningful connection via open houses or larger engagement events such as the Engineering Technology Conference. In the following section we detail the Techie Friday events that have been developed to introduce prospective students to our programs and faculty. The event contains multiple informational sessions, and each individual session has been developed by faculty to engage students in some sort of activity related to the discipline. The events were conducted on a small scale in the previous academic year and have been refined and streamlined over summer. The 2017-2018 academic year marks the first use of the moniker, Techie Friday.

Techie-Friday

The cornerstone of our efforts are the Techie-Friday events. These events involve an approximate two-hour visit by local high school students where they participate in two 50-minute faculty-led sessions and a 25-minute session led by student services. As the name suggests, the events are held on Fridays during the morning, and there is a purposeful strategic aspect to the timing of the event. Friday mornings are generally convenient for faculty and staff because normal classes are not held on Friday. This time also tends to be convenient for local schools. The result is that it is possible to develop a long-term schedule. At the beginning of the year, local schools may simply select their chosen date on a first-come, first-serve basis. If a scheduling conflict arises the SSC will then coordinate a solution, which may involve multiple schools attending on the same day, offering a morning and afternoon session, or attempting to find an alternate day. We attempt to cap the number of students visiting at any given time to 30 due to classroom size constraints, but have accommodated up to 60.

The following sections illustrate our approach to interacting with students during the Techie Friday events. Table 2 presents a listing of the sessions students may attend along with a short description of the topics covered. Visiting students typically attend two program sessions plus the informational session, but occasionally more sessions are made available if there is time in the visiting school's schedule. The ideal number of students in any given program session is 10-16, so a group larger than 20 will likely be split for the two program sessions and then brought back together for the informational session that occurs at the end of the event. The long-term goal for these sessions is to include aspects from every discipline in each of the sessions so that the events are mutually supportive in terms of recruitment.

The informational session contains an overview of the location. During this session, students are introduced to how the location is connected to the parent institution and the differences between the location and main campus. Throughout the presentation potential students are taught the main differences and similarities between Engineering and Engineering Technology, and what distinguishes our location from a larger campus. One positive aspect of our statewide locations that we stress to the prospective students is the fact that the average classes are small, often ranging from 6-12 depending on the major, meaning that faculty almost always know students by name and face. Students are then given an overview of each major offered that includes prerequisites, potential class schedules, and future job opportunities. Tuition comparisons between our location and the main campus are provided, along with detailed information about the application and advising processes of our location.

Table 2 – Techie-Friday Session Descriptions

Session	Description
EET	Overview of Electrical Engineering Technology careers and some differences between engineering technology and pure engineering. Active demonstration of radio frequency jamming technology.
MET	Overview of Mechanical Engineering Technology and the engineering design process using examples from the Orthopedic industry. Activity involves coming up with constraints that must be considered in the design of an artificial knee joint.
IET & SCMT	Overview of Industrial Engineering and Supply Chain Management Technology disciplines. Activity is based on a small optimization problem for a start-up company.
RoET	Overview of the RoET program. Activity introduces programmable logic controllers and concepts related to computer programming.
OL	Overview of leadership traits and skills in the workplace. Activity is based on role playing to highlight the importance of communication.
Student Services Coordinator	Overview of campus life, cost of attendance, financial aid process, enrollment process.

The EET session begins with a description of some of the breadth and scope of electrical engineering careers, followed by a discussion that contrasts pure engineering and engineering technology programs. The contrasts are made in broad terms, but also in specific terms as they relate to the location, the parent college, and the parent university. Following this introduction, students are given a demonstration of how electrical engineering can be applied in a life or death situation using a scenario that makes use of radio frequency jamming. The scenario is a military vehicle traveling in hostile territory that has become the target of an assassin who has planted a remotely-controlled roadside bomb: a radio-controlled improvised explosive device (RCIED). The demo includes a mock RCIED created from an old garage door opener, and shows how a student-built jammer prevents it from operating. RCIED and jammer operation are explained using an audio (sound wave) analogy, and the jammer's suppression of the mock RCIED remote control signals is illustrated graphically on an overhead projection of a spectrum analyzer display. The spectrum analyzer presents a compelling image of how the jammer's signal overwhelms and disables RCIED operation.

In the MET session, students are exposed to a survey of careers relevant to the MET program, but the emphasis is on the application of MET to the nearby orthopedic industry. During the sessions students are guided through the design process for a total knee replacement, with images of both healthy and damaged knee joints. Students are informed that based on the condition of the sample damaged joint, the best solution for the patient can be to replace the total joint. At which point the following question is posed: If you were given the task of developing the first ever artificial joint, where would you start? Typically the broad nature of the question causes confusion, at which point the focus is narrowed down to two main areas of consideration: (1)

what would the ideal knee replacement look like and (2) from what material should it be made. Students then work together to develop a list of constraints regarding the design itself. Once a list of constraints is developed, a brief history of total knee replacements is discussed, with a focus on how the overall shape has evolved and issues that arise with the design as well as the common materials that are used and how those have changed over the years. Also discussed are clinical issues that have arisen from the implants, as well as a discussion on how implants could be redesigned to avoid such complications in the future.

In the IET session, the emphasis is on applications of the IET and SCMT programs. Students are first given a brief introduction to the concept of supply chain complexity using examples of a cell phone supply chain and the supply chain involved in food production and distribution. Then, the IET discipline is introduced by way of discussing the efficiency and sustainability from these examples and how the concept of product development and innovation overlaps with supply chains. Following the introduction, students are given a design challenge involving a hypothetical startup company that provides luxury tours for national parks in the United States. Students vote on a list of parks to visit, identify their location on a map, and then plan out an efficient route to minimize the cost of fuel for the trip in small groups. Students are then introduced to the classic Traveling Salesman Problem (TSP) and shown how technology can be used to quickly solve optimization problems. Usually, one or more student groups find the optimal solution to the small TSP problem, and many students come very close. The session closes with a discussion of how optimization does not always lead to good solutions and how as IET and SCMT graduates they will need to apply many tools in order to sustainably design and deliver product and services that improve society.

The RoET session focuses on industrial controls, specifically the programmable logic controller (PLC). As students enter the laboratory they are asked to divide into small teams and select one of the available workstations where a computer is open and running a program. As the students are introduced to PLCs and their use, they are able to view live code of a working system. The session is interactive, and the goal is to learn what the students know about programming in general. Then each student team is asked to start pressing buttons at their workstation and observe how the computer screen changes as a machine's inputs and outputs vary. At this point the students are challenged to play an interactive PLC software game while the machine is operated. The game is similar to a Simon Says or Whack-a-Mole game where a player responds to colored lights. The correct input keeps the game going, and a wrong selection ends the game. As one student plays the game another examines the code in an attempt to identify which part of the computer code is controlling the random lights and which part is performing the error-checking function. The goal of this session is to help students understand the function of the code as they enjoy a "videogame" introduction to the world of industrial controls.

The OL session begins with a discussion about leadership and what traits make for a good leader. Students are guided through a discussion centering on good leaders from past and present, and what traits and skills might make for a good leader in the future. Students then participate in an activity where they act out some of the techniques good leaders use, such as effective listening and confident dialogue. Students are guided through the activity in a way that highlights how *needs* and *wants* can be very different things, and how communication is key to uncovering which is which. Students are then led through a discussion on how effective teams usually

produce much better outcomes than poorly-functioning teams. The last aspect of the session discusses careers in leadership, and how having a leadership position does not necessarily make for a good leader.

Assessment

One benefit of focusing on building sustainable recruitment processes is that this focus will enable the location's administrators to collect actionable data regarding the effectiveness of the processes. While it is not perfectly clear which data will be most useful in refining and improving the recruitment processes, the literature suggests that gathering information regarding students' interest in attending college after high school, interest in attending college at the location, and interest in the programs offered at the location are useful baseline data [2, 3]. Information is collected using a survey given to students during the informational session of the Techie-Friday event, which occurs at the end of the visit. No information that is identifiable to individual students is collected on the surveys, although the data can be stratified by which sessions the students attended and by school. Due to the small number of surveys taken to date, the data are not stratified by high school or grade level in this analysis. We expect this will be a central element of the analysis in the future.

The appendix of this paper presents survey questions that were asked of students after the informational session. To date, surveys have been conducted for 4 different high school groups totaling 103 students. It is anticipated that information for a total of 12 schools and more than 300 students that have visited our location will be collected during the course of the 2017-2018 academic year.

Data analysis for survey responses collected to date are presented in Figures 4-7. Responses to questions using Likert-type scales are presented as mean responses, while responses for all other questions were coded using a binary convention for each item and are presented as percentages. Responses for Question 1 were calculated as a percentage of students who were aware of the location's presence. This relates directly to our goal of increasing awareness of our presence in the community. Of the respondents, only 43.6% indicated they were aware of the location prior to being informed of the visit to campus.

Figure 4 presents mean responses for interest in STEM fields, interest in attending college after high school, and interest in attending college at our location. The results seem to follow a logical pattern, as less interest is shown for STEM fields than for overall interest in attending college, and interest in the specific campus relatively lower still. The primary purpose of this question is to help the SSC and faculty understand whether or not students that attend the event have interest in STEM fields. If interest in STEM for the pool of students attending the events is low, it is unlikely that the events will translate into improved enrollments.

Figure 5 presents responses to survey Question 2 as a percentage of students who selected the individual response item. The results suggest that cost of attendance and campus location are the most important factors to students when selecting a college. While it is too early to make broad generalizations, these initial results may be able to provide some general guidance as we move forward. First, because the cost of college appears to be a primary concern for prospective

students, the relatively lower cost of attendance at the satellite location is a clear positive and is something we should continue to emphasize in the informational session. However, because class size does not appear to be a significant factor for prospective students, it may make sense to forego emphasizing class size during the events.

Interest in individual programs/disciplines reported by mean Likert scale response are shown in Figure 6. This question is intended to determine which programs resonate with students after they are introduced to the discipline by a faculty member. Figure 7 presents the percentage of students who would consider pursuing each degree if they were to enroll at our location. In both cases, the results seem to follow longstanding trends that favor enrollment in mechanical and electrical engineering programs. The purpose of these questions is to assess how well we are presenting the programs to prospective students, and which degree programs are most likely to turn prospective students into enrolled students. In the future we will need to determine whether or not the best course of action will be to strengthen weaker areas of our value proposition to students or to leverage the stronger areas.

Discussion

The strategy we have presented in this paper is a starting point that will be refined over the next two to four years. The main objective for this first year is to build comfort with the routine of offering Techie Friday events, learn from the experience and from the data being collected, and identify areas for improvement related to the events and related to how best to interact with prospective students in the black box phase. An important aspect of

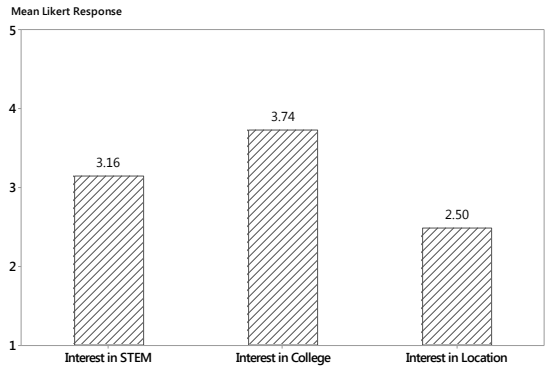

Figure 4 – Survey Responses, Q4-Q6

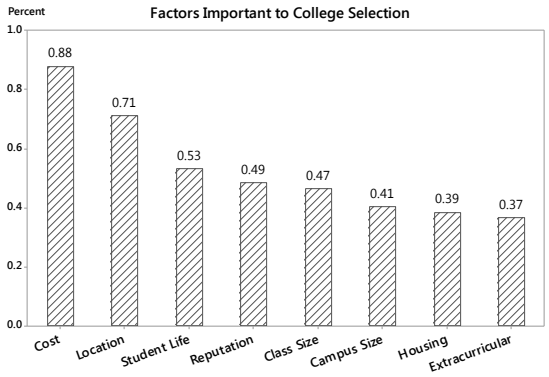

Figure 5 – Survey Responses, Q3

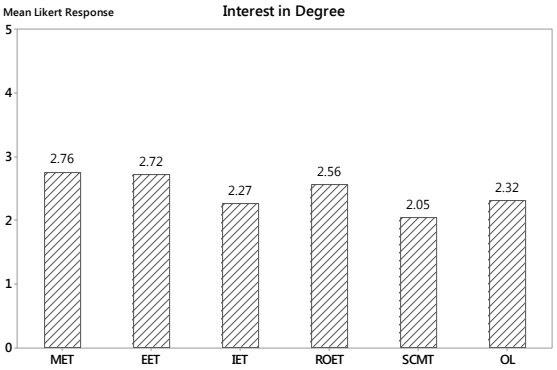

Figure 6 – Survey Responses, Q7-Q12

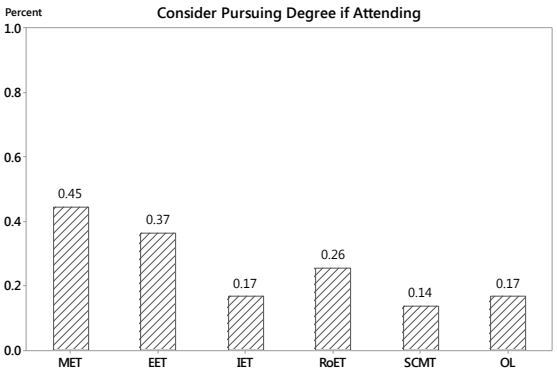

Figure 7 – Survey Responses, Q13

the improvement for the following years will be to improve the individual sessions. At the end of the academic year, faculty and staff will meet to share their learnings and collaboratively redesign each session so that each event is mutually supportive in terms of informing students about the opportunities in each degree program.

Another key improvement in terms of the events is to determine if it may be possible to host mainly students who are either likely to be interested in the degree programs offered or more likely to be interested in attending college locally. Such an approach would be in-line with the location's mission to serve the immediate geographic region, but may hinder our overall goal of building awareness within the community. Another consideration is that our experience has shown that such an approach would be difficult to coordinate with local high schools. Most visits are comprised of a single class (e.g., AP Physics), and can be challenging for high school teachers to do anything other than bring an entire class at one time. Building relationships over time with teachers and high school administrators may be a way to work around this constraint, but we are uncertain at this time whether or not this will be feasible.

The final change that we expect will happen relates to connecting with students after the visit. For students that express interest in the programs and may be interested in attending college at the location, we intend on adapting our prior Engineering Technology Conference into a premier event where prospective students are able to spend a day on campus engaging in more in-depth engineering activities. Events like this have been successful in the past [3, 7], and we believe that offering such opportunities will allow us to further engage with these students in the black box phase. We also believe creating opportunities to connect with the parents of prospective students is important. The goal here is to ensure that they have all the information regarding the location they need to make the best decision regarding the choice of where to attend college. While we do not anticipate eliminating the other engagement events, it is possible they will also be adapted in response to changes in the Techie Friday effort.

Regardless of any changes made in the future, we believe this overall strategy will allow us to better engage with prospective students while ensuring the engagement activities are sustainable. Our past efforts to engage using large events that occur once or twice each year are difficult to plan and execute because they occur infrequently, and required a major effort by each faculty member. Spreading out the commitment over time, creating mutually supportive recruitment sessions, and providing flexibility in scheduling should ease the burden of planning. As the Techie Friday events mature and become sustainable, it should be possible to begin refining the administrative portion though data collection and analysis. The goal here will be to foster continuous improvement of the engagement processes.

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Appendix – Survey Questions

Background

Q1	Were you aware of this location prior to Techie Friday	Yes			No	
Q2	Your Current Grade Level	9	10	11	12	
Q3	What factors are important to you when choosing a College? (Select all that apply)	School Reputation	Location	Extracurricular Activities		
		Cost	Student Life	Class Size		
		Size of Campus	On-Campus Housing			

Interest in Attending College

		No Interest	Little Interest	Some Interest	Strong Interest	Very Strong Interest
Q4	How interested are you in a career in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM)?	1	2	3	4	5
Q5	How interested are you in attending college after high school?	1	2	3	4	5
Q6	How interested are you in considering attending college at this location?	1	2	3	4	5

Interest in Specific Programs

	How much interest do you have in the fields of:						
Q7	Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q8	Electrical Engineering Technology (EET)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q9	Industrial Engineering Technology (IET)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q10	Robotics Engineering Technology (RoET)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q11	Supply Chain Management Technology (SCMT)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q12	Organizational Leadership (OL)	1	2	3	4	5	
Q13	If you were to attend college at this location, which degree program(s) would you most likely consider? (Select all that apply)	MET	EET	IET	RoET	SCMT	OL