Engaging secondary students in the university experience

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Abstract

In our tenth year, the University of the Sunshine Coast celebrates the strong relationships fostered with the students and wider community of the Sunshine Coast. This mutual support is evidenced by USC’s first preference increases of up to 30% in the 2006 entry period and our consistently high ratings from our students for university experience. A number of projects operating within the External Relations unit assist prospective students and their families to engage with the USC experience. While many universities offer similar projects, USC’s student focused approach signals our strong commitment to students and means that we do things a little differently. Discussion will include the Headstart Program, Student Ambassadors, Student Blogs and Keep PACE – Program for Advancing Community Education.

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After trialing one or two semesters of study, Headstart students are also better able to make a successful transition from high school to university further reducing the first year drop out rate.

Headstart students receive significant support from their school and the university. The External Relations unit holds Headstart information evenings twice yearly for prospective students and their families. Headstart students attend a welcome session in Orientation Week to ensure they are well prepared to start the semester. Lecturers provide regular feedback on Headstart student progress. And school Headstart coordinators meet with students regularly to ensure they are successfully managing their high school and university study.

As a result, 36% of Headstart students receive grades of Distinction or High Distinction. 90% of Headstart students, who finished their study in 2004, made tertiary applications in the 2005 entry period. Anecdotal reports from schools indicate Headstart study positively impacts on academic success at secondary school. Parents also observe increased levels of maturity and confidence in their children as a result of Headstart study.

**Student Ambassadors**

Student Ambassadors are highly trained current university students who visit secondary schools to deliver presentations and attend school based career expos. The Student Ambassador program has been highly successful since its introduction in 2003 with Ambassadors visiting nearly 100 schools each year. Due to their age and recent high school experiences, Student Ambassadors are better able to relate to secondary students and can provide first hand knowledge of the university experience. Their integrity within the university context means that prospective students receive a more personalized presentation which reflects the issues and concerns affecting current students. Survey feedback shows us that secondary students appreciate this approach and feel more comfortable discussing their concerns in this environment.

Unlike many university Ambassador programs, USC Student Ambassadors visit schools and conduct presentations alone. They are not supervised by other University staff therefore the level of knowledge and skills they require is high. Ambassadors receive training in communication and presentation skills as well as regular information updates so they can confidently speak about new developments and current issues. This structure creates a win-win situation where prospective students receive excellent first hand information about university choices, but Ambassadors also develop skills and experiences which will help them in the job market.

**Student Blogs**

Blogs are web logs written by current USC students describing their university experience. The blogs have a personal focus and assist prospective students to understand both the challenges and benefits of studying at USC. Blogs cover many issues including the transition to university, attending lectures and tutorials, exams, dealing with stress, social life etc. The entries are informative, funny and reassuring and help prospective students and their families understand what to expect at USC and
how others have managed their transition. Examples of current blogs will be demonstrated via the USC website during the presentation.

Keep PACE – Program for Advancing Community Education

Keep PACE is a series of free information sessions and workshops for students, parents and community members. Sessions relate to continuing education and target those issues which can cause the most anxiety for prospective students and their families. Held throughout the year, sessions include: choices after high school, note taking skills, avoiding plagiarism, faculty information sessions, and free career counseling appointments to help students choose the career which is right for them. Since its inception in 2004, close to 1000 people have attended sessions with the majority identifying themselves as secondary students or families of secondary students. In its first year, sessions were fully booked with audience members overflowing out of the theatres. More sessions are offered each year in response to public demand. Feedback from attendees is consistently positive and reflects an appreciation of USC’s personal approach.

Conclusion

Together, these projects are successfully engaging prospective students on the Sunshine Coast. This success is evidenced by the continuing strong demand for programs such as Headstart and Keep PACE and USC’s first preference increase of up to 30% in the 2006 entry period. The University of the Sunshine Coast values the student experience and will continue to assist students make informed tertiary choices.

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