

ATTRACTING THE BEST STUDENTS
Webb Institute Strategic Planning Retreat
March 16-18, 2007

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Overview

This paper discusses various means of attracting the best students. It addresses all ideas the authors could conceive of, many of which are already being implemented at Webb. Some approaches have not been pursued in the past due to financial limitations. Through the services of co-author Alana Smentek, a student survey will be conducted and provided as a companion piece to this paper. The survey will seek to learn the following for those students currently enrolled at Webb:

- How did you first hear about Webb?
- What attracted you to seek further information?
- How did you follow-up?
- What were the two most significant factors in deciding to enroll?
- Would you have paid tuition to come to Webb? If yes, how much would you have been willing to pay?

In preparing this paper the authors have taken as a given that the curriculum and the facilities must be first rate to attract the best students. For the most part we believe Webb has both of these attributes, but they will be discussed further in a following section concerning “Face-to-Face” contact, specifically campus tours.

The paper will conclude with the authors’ recommendations concerning how to proceed in the immediate future while recognizing that the discussion at the retreat may elicit further ideas and an improved plan for the way ahead.

Publicity

Print Media.

One of the more effective ways to attract students, especially the best students, is favorable publicity. About five years ago, the *New York Times* did a story on Webb. The result was an extraordinary number of New York and New

Jersey applicants that spring with a disproportionate number of New York enrollees. This is a concrete example of the power of good publicity. Webb should seek a follow-up, perhaps getting a major publication to do a story on the current President concerning his experience at the Coast Guard Academy and Webb, public/private colleges with excellent students.

Newsday has become reliable with stories concerning commencement and on at least one occasion, covered the freshman activity wherein they were to construct a device to enable them to “walk-on-water”. As the local paper these relationships should continue to be fostered.

On a national scale Webb has regularly been included in *US News* issue on America’s Best Colleges. Every effort should be made to improve our ranking and continue to gain this excellent national exposure. Press release information should be sent to other publications that evaluate and publicize opportunities for top notch educations.

Also on a national scale is the *Princeton Review’s Best 361 Colleges in America* published each year. This is slightly different than most college guides which try to include all colleges. The somewhat exclusive listing tends to interest the best students who are seeking the best colleges. It is important that Webb remains ranked in this publication and that it rank very high on the list. Of interest is the fact that the publication seeks information directly from enrolled students and thereby is somewhat at the mercy of the students in achieving high rankings.

The Internet.

It is widely accepted that students are now turning to the internet as a first contact with institutions of interested. There are many sites out there that provide information about naval architecture and marine engineering, as well as about Webb Institute. Most of the information is accurate, but some of it is outdated, and some inaccurate. These sites get their information from other sites, from surveys the institution fills out, and some directly from the institution. The best way to ensure that accurate information can be found about Webb on the internet is to have a modern, up-to-date and user friendly website.

When one does a simple *Google* search for Webb Institute, one finds many different links to information on Webb. Our home page appears first, next the *Wikipedia* listing shows up, then *USNews.com* and others like nymmentor.edu which is hosted by New York State, answers.com which is related to *Wikipedia*,

Petersons.com, Princetonreview.com and many others including some not related to our academic mission like lioddities.com, which has a uniquely historical view of Long Island and Webb Institute.

Webb Institute is in the process of rethinking and retooling its website along with all admissions materials. Students should be able to one-stop-shop Webb's site for readily available and easy to find information on academics, admissions requirements, financial aid, student life, athletics, winter work and everything else that happens on campus. Webb's facilities, program, and mission should be prominently displayed for web visitors to see.

Part of attracting highly qualified students is also attracting their parents. The Army knows this and is currently running television and internet campaigns to create a favorable opinion about the Army in the minds of parents. Parents should be able to find information about job placement rates, scholarships and financial aid, the current and future states of the maritime industry, campus policies and academic/social schedules for the year.

The plan for the new website is expected do all this and more. The site will be a living and breathing place for information about the school, its programs, its students, faculty, staff and life at Webb. It will contain information for a first-time visitor as well as enough information to keep a repeat visitor coming back for more.

TV/Radio.

Many colleges use radio and television to promote and advertise their programs. In the case of radio this tends to be regionally oriented and has not been used by Webb. Cost and the transient nature of the spot have been the primary inhibitors to this medium. Similarly television commercials are notoriously expensive, both to produce and to air. Clearly both these approaches reach large numbers of students, but it is problematical whether the essence of Webb can be transmitted well through this means without the expenditure of large amounts of money.

Direct Mail.

Each year, Webb Institute purchases information from The College Board about students who have taken the PSAT test as sophomore. The College Board, through questionnaires on the PSAT, finds the students who have an interest in science, math, engineering or architecture and then filters out those students who

do not meet our preset score range. The list of students who meet the criteria are sent to Webb, put into a database and provided to a mailing company who prints and distributes a personalized postcard to each student prompting them to visit our website. This “first touch” is the beginning of the recruitment process.

Currently, Webb Institute does not look at the ACT tests when considering students for admission. The ACT is an Iowa based test and is the standardized test of choice for the Midwest states. This means that many of those Midwest schools do not have their students take the PSAT, which does not allow us to reach qualified students from that area with our “first touch” postcards. The PLAN test is the ACT’s version of the PSAT. We are looking into working with the ACT to purchase student information based on the PLAN test in the same way we do with the PSAT. In doing so, we can reach high school sophomores and inform them about Webb and its admissions requirements. Those students who like what they see can plan to take the SATs in their junior and senior years. This would allow Webb to reach a population that it has yet to tap in its recruiting process.

Webb Institute has been working with the same marketing strategy and admissions recruiting materials since 2000, and although the number of students on campus is up, the number of applicants has been higher and student attrition is lower, the number of qualified applicants (those who have the scholastic qualifications and academic ability to go to Webb) has remained about the same. The new marketing strategy is simple; reach out to the qualified applicants, and after they know about Webb, reach out again and again. It is a strategy of “touches” and steady communication. Webb is working on the following new materials:

1st Touch:

New Student Search Postcards: Sent to students who fit our preset criteria on the PSAT test (and possibly the PLAN test as well) which will direct them to the newly designed website.

2nd Touch:

The newly designed website: The students will be able to read about all aspects of Webb Institute and hopefully this will prompt them to request more information.

3rd and 4th Touches:

New Viewbooks: Although beautiful, the old viewbook is expensive. For much less money, Webb plans to create two different “mini-viewbooks” that will convey

the same information as the old one. One will focus on the academic side of Webb while the other will concentrate on the student side.

5th Touch:

After the viewbooks are sent and students have requested additional information, a series of other publications, search pieces and articles can be sent to them. Some will be tri-fold brochures, our academic catalog, a small brochure about the Winter Work Internship program or recent print articles like “What’s in a NAME?” by professor George Petrie or our write-ups in the Princeton Review’s *Best 361 Colleges* and/or Peterson’s *Four-Year Colleges* book.

The other new pieces of admissions marketing that are being developed are a poster and a new version of Webb’s academic catalog. The poster will have basic information about Webb and how to contact us. These posters will be sent to high school guidance offices, yacht clubs and other places where interest in Webb may be found. The catalog will contain information about the course schedule, descriptions of each course taken, the mission of Webb, information about the library and information technology, and Winter Work, Monday Lectures, Senior Seminars, etc. This is a great resource for alumni volunteers at college fairs as well as a great recruiting tool for the serious prospective student.

Financial Aid

The fact that Webb Institute offers full tuition scholarships is one of the most significant factors in attracting students, including the best students. Although few colleges can make this offer to every student admitted, many can, and do make this offer to the very best and brightest in their applicant pool. It is known from past experience that Webb has lost out in the competition for some of these top students because they actually received better financial packages than Webb could offer! The increasing number of in-house room and board scholarships, such as the Kurz Scholarship and the Glostien Scholarship, are the first steps in creating the ability to further improve the bargain Webb is. The entire issue of financial aid is still very important, even for a full tuition scholarship college like Webb.

It is believed, by some, that one of the primary factors in attracting the best students is the full tuition scholarship and this must be preserved at all costs if Webb Institute as we know it is to continue to be the best. The survey discussed elsewhere in this paper will provide further illumination on this aspect. The quality of the students may be enhanced if efforts to strengthen our financial aid program are successful.

Publicized Events

Many colleges conduct contests either as sponsors themselves or hosts for other contests, such as the national robotics contest. The benefit to the college is the publicity and the exposure to the type of student that the event attracts. Obviously in order to attract a student they must hear of the college and that has been an historical problem for Webb. Webb is considering the feasibility of creating a summer engineering experience similar to that conducted at other high end engineering colleges. Staff members have been assigned to review this concept and report back to the President. Alternatively the college might consider developing a contest, or seek to be the venue of an existing contest, to bring technically oriented students to the campus for direct exposure to Webb Institute.

The current freshmen introductory project could form the basis of such a contest. At a minimum Webb should continue to publicize its current competition for the benefit of local publicity as was gained in *Newsday* some years back when they did an article on the water walking contest.

Face to Face Contacts

College Fairs: Webb Institute attends about eighty college fairs in the United States each recruiting year. On a local level, the Assistant Director of Student Services and Admissions, Kristen Pettis, attends around thirty fairs, reaching students in the Long Island, New York City, Westchester and New Jersey areas. Alumni volunteers help out for the other fifty or so fairs each year. These fairs give Webb the opportunity to gain exposure to large quantities of college-seeking students who may not have been aware that Webb Institute actually exists. Using alumni and staff Webb also attends the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) college fairs in New York City, Long Island, Northern New Jersey, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Seattle, San Diego and Hartford, as well as a number of regional and high school fairs.

Alumni Recruiting: The Alumni Recruiting program has fallen off a bit from where it was back in the early 2000's, and that is most likely due to combining the Admissions Counselor position with the Director of Student Affairs position in 2002. This caused the one employee dedicated to recruiting to split time with Student Services, Athletics and Admissions Counseling. It has started to bounce back now that the Associate Director of Student Services and Admissions

has taken the role, but it can still grow further. Alumni attend around 50 college fairs in a recruiting year. That is a lot of college fairs, but that number could be greater. Webb will be seeking to recruit in new areas of the country, and to make our presence known at new schools. Therefore more alumni volunteers will be needed to help out. Due to limitations on staff size it is recommended that the Alumni Association consider identifying an officer to coordinate recruiting activities.

Magnet Schools: Webb Institute is in the process of identifying and targeting magnet schools in the United States. Magnet schools are schools that focus on science and math courses and prepare students for colleges like Webb Institute. In identifying these schools, Webb should be able to get to their college fairs, attract their students, and hopefully gain more qualified applicants. Many of these schools are outside the local area, so if they have college fairs, the admissions office will need to rely on the Alumni volunteers to help us make our presence felt at these schools.

Webb Open House: Open House is the biggest event Admissions holds each year. In an attempt to promote more Early Decision applications, the date for Open House was moved from late October to late September two years ago. Since 2000, the number of attendees has been steadily growing. In 2000, 30 prospective students attended and only 1 claimed to have read about the event on the website. In 2002, 37 students attended and 6 claimed to find out about it on the website. In 2004, 47 students attended and 15 found out about it on the website. And this year, 2006, 44 students attended and over half of them (25) found out about the event via the website. The other reasons that the students attended were:

- Received invitations sent by the admissions office
- Heard about it at a college fair
- Informed of it by a guidance counselor
- Other word of mouth.

One way to enhance this event is to host two Open Houses a year. One could be held in the spring for any high school student, and one in the fall for high school seniors. This may make the event a little smaller and more personal and hopefully ensure that all of the prospects' questions get answered.

Student Assessment

This section was written by Alana Smentek, the junior class president. She was requested to personalize her experience and observations and to prepare and conduct a survey to be provided later. Her work follows:

There are so many stories that I have heard from my peers about how they found out about Webb. Some of my peers knew that they wanted to go to Webb because they knew an alumnus, or they wanted to carry on the family legacy. Others chose Webb because of the rigorous engineering curriculum or the full tuition scholarship. Of course, there are also the stories the ones that simply love boats and knew that Webb was a perfect fit.

Many people ask me how I found out about Webb. Growing up in a landlocked part of the country, I never dreamed of designing boats, though I did love boating. The first time I heard about Webb was through the *Princeton Review's Best 361 Colleges in America*. I received the guide for my birthday during the Spring Semester of my junior year of high school and promptly started looking through prospective schools. My brother was flipping through the guide picking colleges at random when he came upon the review of Webb Institute. He was reading the review aloud to my family, and when he told us how many people were enrolled, we all started laughing. The consensus was that the people who chose to go to such a small school were crazy, to which my brother immediately added that I would fit in perfectly.

I did not think twice about considering Webb until I read another review. In the *Barron's Guide to the 50 Most Competitive Colleges*, there was a much longer and in-depth review about Webb than in the *Princeton Review*. Throughout my whole life I had a passion for science and mathematics, and during high school I realized that engineering would combine and apply mathematics and science. I knew I wanted to go to a school with a strong engineering program. I also “knew” that I wanted to go to a school with a student body of at least 1,000. While reading the *Barron's Guide*, I was intrigued by the article about Webb Institute. Most schools of under 1,000 students I eliminated simply based on size, but the article about Webb emphasized the strong engineering curriculum, the rigorous workload, as well as the community aspect of Webb. This was enough to make me go to the Webb website and learn more.

After looking around the website, I requested more information, and was thrilled when I got a postcard that had my name on it with a unique website for me to visit. Although the website was not much, I later received an application for admissions. The application for admissions was quite shocking. I thought that part of the application was missing. I could not believe that I did not need to write an essay, and that I only needed a few letters of recommendation to complete the application. Applying to Webb was so easy considering that I was in the process of applying to six other schools and had quite a few essays to write.

My parents were skeptical about Webb, as was I, even though I had made the decision to apply. Because my mom and I were going to visit East Coast colleges, we decided to stop at Webb and take a tour. Sadly, it was the tour that almost drove me away from Webb. I was given a tour by Mr. Murray, and at the end of my tour I was not very impressed by Webb. I thought that the campus was fantastic; however, Mr. Murray was not at all personable and seemed to be shying me away from Webb as opposed to welcoming me. I had read on the website prospective student could sit in on classes while they were visiting. In my correspondence with Mr. Murray, I was never offered the opportunity to sit in on a class. True, I did not take the initiative to ask if I could sit in on a class, but I did not think I would have to ask. I thought that I would be offered the chance to do so. My mom and I felt very disappointed while we were leaving Webb. As it turned out, I had already sent in my admissions application to Webb. I may not have sent in my application had I received the same treatment beforehand.

Mentally, I was prepared to go to Northwestern University in Chicago. My parents are both alumni, and my extended family lives throughout the Midwest. Northwestern was going to be a good fit. However, on my 18th birthday, exactly one year after I had found out about Webb, I received a call telling me that I had made it through the first round of the admissions process at Webb. At that point, I decided to give Webb a second chance. I really liked the engineering focus of the curriculum. I knew at other schools I would have to pad my schedule with humanities courses, a fact that I was loathing. Also, the idea of having eight months of practical work experience after graduating was enticing. Of course, in the back of my mind I also was thinking about tuition costs. My parents always told me that they would pay for my college tuition, and that money was no object. Although I knew that my parents would pay the \$50,000 per year to send me to Northwestern, I simply did not want them to pay that amount.

Coming back to New York for the interview was interesting, to say the least. Mr. Murray told me that people often come for a whole weekend as a pre-frosh. Since I was paying so much to fly out to Webb, I figured that I would come on a Thursday, interview on a Friday, and leave Sunday morning. Most people were shocked that I was staying so long. I guess I felt a little misled about the length of stay for regular "P.F." As soon as I got to Webb, it was suddenly apparent what student life was really like. When I had originally visited, I was at Webb in the middle of the morning. Everyone was in class, and the building had a rather vacant feel. I happened to walk into Webb as a bunch of the sophomores were recreating scenes from the Odyssey. The students gave life to the school that had previously seemed lifeless.

That night I was introduced to many of the freshmen, and my host took me around the school, though she had a lot of homework to do. I ended up hanging out with a few of her classmates in the pub, just talking and playing pool. Although I was bit shy at the time, I started to see myself as a student at Webb. The interview with Mr. Kiss was very relaxed compared to the other admissions interviews I had endured. I enjoyed the classes that I attended, and simply felt welcomed into Webb. I was hooked, and Webb suddenly became my top choice for prospective schools.

I was thrilled when I found out that I was accepted into Webb. In the end, the two most significant deciding factors about coming to Webb were the curriculum and the student body. Without having experienced these aspects of student life, I never would have chosen Webb. The students and the academic rigor make Webb Institute the best.

Because the students are the life of Webb Institute, I plan to conduct a survey of all of the students. In the survey I will ask students to answer the following questions:

1. How did you first hear about Webb?
2. What attracted you to seek further information?
3. How did you follow up after receiving that information?
4. What were the two most significant factors in deciding to enroll?
5. If you had to repeat the college admissions process again, would you pick Webb? Why or why not?
6. Would you have paid tuition to come to Webb? If yes, how much would you have been willing to pay?

Once the survey is complete, I will assess the results. Because there are so many stories about how people chose Webb, I imagine that there will be a myriad of answers to the survey. Hopefully these answers will help us to understand what factors attract students to Webb.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The authors conclude that effective contact with top students is the most important initial step in enrolling the best students. It is believed that the best and most productive contacts are made through the direct mailing programs to the high scoring students on the PSAT exam and the equivalent exam sponsored by the ACT. Once the initial contacts have been made, the full tuition scholarship is most probably the most attractive aspect of the Webb package (assuming the curriculum is desired by the prospect). The campus visit is also one of the best methods of determining the “fit” of the prospective student, both from the student and the college’s perspective.

The principal recommendations are:

- **Continue to refine and enhance the direct mailing to PSAT and add mailings to PLAN high achievers**
- **Refine and improve the campus tours and student visits**
- **Continue and enhance the Open House at Webb**
- **Identify a Webb Alumni Association official to coordinate alumni recruiting**
- **Maintain the full tuition scholarship**
- **Improve and develop the financial aid program for room and board**
- **Promote positive publicity in all mediums**
- **Assess the feasibility of a summer engineering program for high school students**