Successful Recruitment Strategy for Student Programs: Using the Example of the Undergraduate Student Research Program

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In 2010, the NASA Undergraduate Student Research Program (USRP) received 4,700 submitted applications from qualified undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students from across the nation, increasing five-fold the amount of interest and awareness for the NASA internship program over the 3 years that Johnson Space Center (JSC), in collaboration with Universities Space Research Association (USRA), has managed the project. This figure indicates an immense increase in applications received for the program, and demonstrates the success of the USRP communications and recruitment campaign. USRP has achieved something unique in creating a high level of interest from undergraduate students. The lessons learned in this achievement can be applied to other student programs.

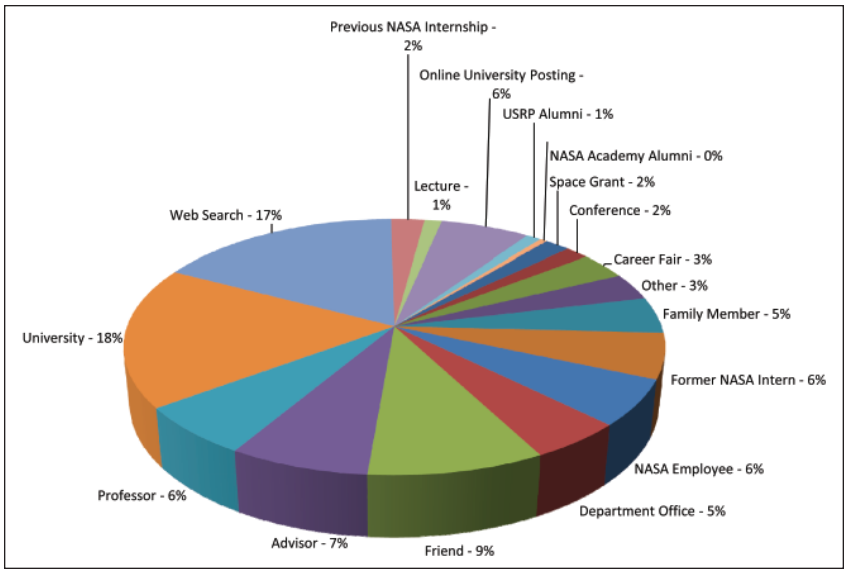

Fig. 1. *How applicants find out about the Undergraduate Student Research Program.*

Fundamental to the successful generation of a large and diverse pool of applicants is developing a comprehensive user-friendly database and reporting system. Marketing research enhances the effectiveness of project personnel in making critical decisions about the recruiting plan. Having a reliable data set that answers important timely questions is essential to determining the effectiveness of the communications plan at any given time. Having the ability to understand the effectiveness of a campaign with up-to-the-minute results, and knowing the exact media source that is working successfully, is priceless. The USRP Connect database and application tool provide up-to-the-minute and reliable information on the USRP student core audience. For example, figure 1 indicates the primary way in which students first learned about the USRP internship program. The chart indicates that applicants primarily learned about the program from their university and from the web. Knowing that, researchers understood that the university was a prime influencer in determining whether the student would apply for the program.

Based on these data, researchers were able to refocus their efforts toward the professors and other university personnel who have the most influence on potential student applicants (total 48%).

For example, conventional recruiting practice calls for a physical presence at university career fairs and conferences. However, based on the data shown in figure 1, only 5% of applicants learned about USRP through career fairs and conferences. Therefore, USRP decided to focus efforts primarily on the online university communications resources, and through key influencers of potential student applicants (i.e., professors, department heads, and other university personnel) to reach its target audience. The five-fold increase in qualified applications demonstrated that the results were effective.

At the core of the USRP communication and recruiting strategy was JSC's mission to do the following: develop an internship program that provided degree-related, hands-on internships for talented undergraduate students pursuing STEM degrees that align with NASA's critical workforce competency needs; provide a high-quality, nationwide undergraduate hands-on experiential program in a technical environment; to attract and stimulate a diverse group of highly qualified undergraduate students from a wide array of academic institutions; and coordinate undergraduate research internships at NASA field centers

under the guidance of NASA scientists and engineers. To accomplish this mission, a strategic communications and marketing effort is essential in creating an educational program that will sustain and thrive for years to come. Figure 2 shows the ways in which USRP distributed its communication messages across the nation. USRP recruiting efforts focused heavily on university and online resources. By focusing on online resources, the communication messages filtered down through the necessary stakeholders within the universities, thus creating the word of mouth necessary to get the message to the intended student target audience. Many students also indicated that they learned about the program through a professor, peer, or academic advisor. Therefore, the indication is that the strategy achieved effective word of mouth by means of viral communications through the web.

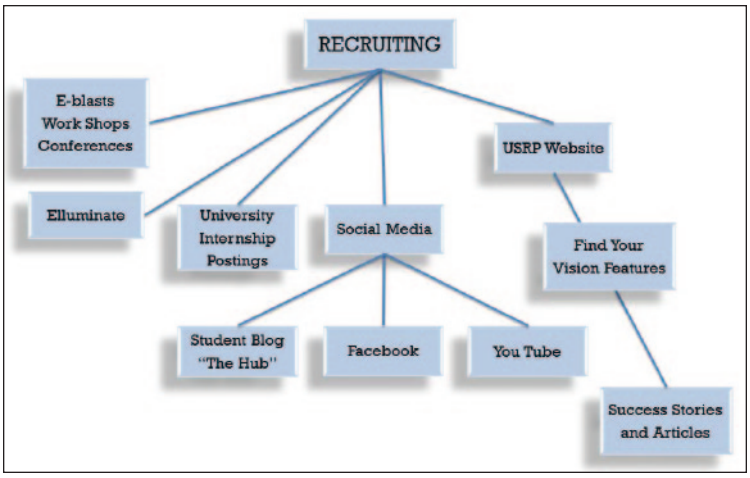

Fig. 2. *Communication strategy.*

In recruiting efforts, researchers sought ways in which they could show the connection between USRP and the latest exciting NASA research that interns have the opportunity to work on every day. The result aligned USRP among its core target audiences of prospective student interns and NASA mentors as NASA's premier internship program. Based on research to date, students are searching for a way to be a part of the NASA mission. They are unaware of educational programs and are confused by the NASA workforce structure and research opportunities. Students who participate in USRP learn quickly the nature and scope of their mentor organizations' mission and focus, and how these missions fit in with NASA's "big picture." USRP wanted to give undergraduate students across the nation a new level of awareness about the opportunities at NASA, as well as excite students about the possibilities that await them.

Fig. 3. *Undergraduate Student Research Program website.*

To see how our communication and recruitment efforts have evolved, and to learn more about the USRP program, go to *http://usrp.usra.edu* (figure 3).