Recruitment of Undergraduates
College of Agricultural and Life Sciences
University of Wisconsin-Madison

The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at UW-Madison suffers from being “invisible” to people in agriculture and those not involved in agriculture. Outside of a few notable leaders in agricultural industry many farmers believe our college too focused on research and not on practical production education. Those non-farmers believe that all we teach is farming. It certainly is an interesting predicament.

The UW-Madison admits students as a university, not by schools or colleges. This means that standards are quite high. Expectations for the 2003-2004 freshman class included being in the top 15% of the class, ACT on average of 27 and a 3.5 G.P.A. As these standards increase, fewer students traditionally interested in production agriculture have been able to meet this standard. Students from urban and suburban areas that meet admissions standards are not aware of the diversity of the college.

Currently the following activities are used for recruitment of undergraduates to our college:

Tagging along with the Office of Admissions. The Office of Admissions usually has a booth at one of the large college fairs (Minneapolis and Milwaukee). The College volunteers to help staff the booth, which allows us to talk directly with students specifically interested in biological sciences and agriculture, as well as answer admissions questions. Cost is usually meals and housing. The Office of Admissions also lets us bring college brochures. Admissions holds receptions throughout the state for families of students interested in learning more about UW-Madison. By volunteering to help we get a chance to speak with students and parents about the benefits of CALS. This has been successful in attracting small numbers to the college.

Wisconsin State Fair. The alumni of the college (WALSAA) traditionally have hosted a booth at the Wisconsin State Fair. This fair is in a very urban setting in a Milwaukee suburb. We see many farm and non-farm students alike. Many alumni and fair-goers stop at our booth to win a bottle of milk. We hope to be able to talk to them about Wisconsin agriculture and biotechnology as well. WALSAA sponsors a $500 scholarship to a high school senior who enrolls in CALS. To be eligible the student must complete a card to be entered in a drawing. These cards also allow us to follow up with the students we have met at the Fair, or sometimes make initial contact as a parent might have signed them up for the scholarship. The scholarship is only awarded if the student enrolls in CALS. Downside, this fair is very expensive to exhibit at (roughly $1,700 for the 10 day event) and we become the University of Wisconsin and represent the whole University without compensation.

National FFA Convention. This annual convention has many active FFA members attending. We may not garner many new recruits to our four-year program at this event (as we have the second highest nonresident tuition in the Big 10 and very high admission standards) but it may solidify those students from Wisconsin interested in attending UW-Madison. It is a good place to recruit for our two-year certificate program, the Farm and Industry Short Course program. Our Short Course program is a hands-on production based curriculum offered November-March. Admissions standards are not as high, and fees are lower making it attractive to out of state students.

State FFA Convention. Similar to the National Convention but targeted at state students. We have a booth and run workshops at the convention. The booth is important to provide visibility to the college and all of the various majors we offer. However the workshops for both the Short Course program and the degree program are more important than the booth. They allow us to speak with students genuinely interested in learning about the programs we offer, the admissions standards and career goals. Often on the trade show
floor, students are collecting things as a teacher-imposed requirement, or they want the “coolest”
giveaways. They are not always looking for higher education information.

World Dairy Expo. As Madison is home to the World Dairy Expo we always have an exhibit. Staffed by
College staff and students, it is a good place to connect with students interested in Short Course and a few
interested in our degree program. Again, rising admission standards have made qualifying students at
these shows difficult.

Wisconsin Science Teacher Convention. Two out of the last three years we have had exhibits at the
Wisconsin State Science Teacher convention. Although no students are present at this convention it
allows us to show science teachers what we have to offer their bright students interested in biological
sciences. We have taken along items to attract them, such as simple DNA extraction experiments that they
can use in their classroom to get them to come and speak with us.

Operation Contact. This is a program done by the CALS Ambassadors, over our winter break. For three
days our students hit the road visiting high schools. Appointments have been set up in agricultural classes
as well as AP or IB biology classes. The target audience is juniors and sophomores. This has been very
effective in educating teachers and students about the opportunities in CALS. The biology students and
teachers do not usually know about us and the agriculture classes usually do not understand admissions
requirements. A team of Ambassadors sets up all the meetings and makes all the needed arrangements.
One drawback is that our winter vacation time is always the semester exam time for high schools. We
usually see about 25 classes over the three-day period. Contact cards are collected from those wishing
more information so we can continue to keep these students informed. This trip is also a great bonding
experience for our Ambassadors.

Ambassador Calling Night. During the admissions process season our CALS Ambassadors spend an
evening a month personally calling on prospective students who have been admitted to the College. The
Ambassadors call to first congratulate them on being admitted to the UW and then to answer any
questions the recruit or their parents may have about the University, the College or student life in general.

Visit Day program. Half-day program. The program is promoted through high school guidance offices, to
students in our database and students who contact us interested in information on the College. Program
includes visiting with a dean, a student panel, a student-led tour and individual or small group meetings
with faculty members in the departmental offices.

Conclusion: Although the College recruiting activities are varied, the activities that pay the largest
dividends are those that foster personal contact with the campus, students and faculty. During the Visit
Days prospective students get direct access to students and faculty and get an up-close look at campus.
Further, when our Ambassadors call on newly admitted students, it creates a personal connection and
reinforces that the College knows and cares about its students. The remaining activities help prospective
students gather information about our programs, but do not create a connection to the campus and yield
few new matriculating students.