

# **Overcoming student recruitment and retention challenges in graphic communications programs**

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**How many here  
would say that  
student recruitment  
is a challenge?**



# Defining the Problem

- Some years ago, Ryerson University experienced a declining trend in student applications to study Graphic Communications
- Conversations have revealed the same trend in other graphic arts programs internationally
  - Some programs have downsized
  - Others have closed
- An additional factor is demographic change in University-age population

# A lack of student applicants is a problem

- Fewer applicants
  - = A shrinking program, questions about viability
  - = Impact on ability to offer elective courses
  - = Fewer graduates to serve industry and societal needs
  - = Challenges to support the graphic arts program:  
*Faculty, Staff, Equipment, Budgets*

## ➤ Quantity of Applicants = ➤ Quality of Students

- Where admission is decided by student grades – or other selection criteria – quality of students is negatively affected
- Decrease in quality of students
  - = Reduced retention and graduation rates
  - = Longer time to graduation
  - = Financial implications
  - = Negative effect on ability to serve industry
  - = Effect on reputation

# Whose problem is this?

- Shared interest in attracting more, and stronger student applications
- At Ryerson University, recruiting efforts are shared:
  - Admissions Department
  - Program Departments and Faculties
- A new financial model (in 2010) of *enrollment-based funding to departments* elevated the importance of recruiting

# What is enrollment-based funding?

# Enrollment-based funding

- Budgets to programs and Faculties are largely based on the number of students enrolled in all courses in all years
- Therefore:
  - Fewer students admitted or enrolled means a budget decrease
  - Student attrition (drop-out) means a budget decrease
- Conversely:
  - High enrollment and retention is rewarded, resulting in resources to the department and Faculty
- *However, budget is not the only reason to focus on recruitment*



# So what did Ryerson do?



# Curriculum Renewal

- Renewed and completely revised program curriculum to ensure continued relevance and appeal – *for many reasons*
  - Reviewed all courses, with a focus on Learning Objectives
  - Added many Elective Course choices, within and outside of graphic communications
  - New Optional Concentrations in four different areas of graphic communications
  - Lab focus shifted toward integrated broad-based graphic technology
  - Credits for Industry Internship and Special Topics courses
  - Improved preparation for graduate (i.e. Master's) studies
  - Opened many graphic communication courses to students from other programs, as electives

# Recruiting Strategy

- Well-qualified applicants have many options for post-secondary studies
- We decided to focus on a multi-pronged approach to reach decision-makers and influencers at different stages in the application and admission process
  - **“Shopping stage”** – learning about, and considering different programs
  - **“Application stage”** – encouraging applications
  - **“Waiting stage”** – maintaining communication
  - **“Acceptance stage”** – encouraging admitted students to accept
  - **“Confirmation stage”** – welcoming and supporting new students

# Consider the Target Audience

- Potential students have more post-secondary options today than ever before
- It's unclear whether they understand the opportunities available to them in graphic arts, and if their views of the printing industry might be outdated
- Potential students have many influencers: teachers, parents, friends, social media, marketing ...

**Ryerson adopted  
a broad approach  
to reach potential  
students and  
influencers**



# Recruiting Strategy Elements

- New recruiting website [www.ryersongcm.ca](http://www.ryersongcm.ca) with SEO to supplement existing program website
- Social media presence @ruGCM on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram
- Liaison sessions with secondary school teachers and guidance counsellors
- Speaker visits at secondary schools
- Program tours at Ryerson for secondary schools
- Virtual tours of labs

# Recruiting Strategy Elements

- New 56-page student-centered promotional booklet, printed and online
- Other promotional materials, or “swag”
- Mailings directly to secondary school teachers and counsellors, and to applicants
- RU Live webinar for applicants, with student hosts
- Open Houses, with VDP-personalized mailed invitations
- Additional liaison with Ryerson’s recruiters

# Resource Requirements

## Time, human and financial resources

- Who?
  - Program Chair and Administrative Staff, with widespread assistance from many faculty, staff and students
  - Others from within Ryerson to assist with web, video, photography and other elements
- Financial Resources
  - Expenses for printing, mailing, promotional materials, and travel to secondary schools
  - Annual recruiting costs ~equal enrollment-based funding generated by one student



# What was the result?



# Increased Student Applications

Year (Sept. Start)	Total Applicants	Admission Target	Ratio (Apps:Trgt)	YOY App. Increase	Increase since 2013
2013	<b>783</b>	184	4.3:1	--	--
2014	<b>809</b>	180	4.5:1	<b>26 (3.3%)</b>	<b>26 (3.3%)</b>
2015	<b>871</b>	174	5.0:1	<b>62 (7.7%)</b>	<b>88 (11.2%)</b>
2016	<b>920*</b>	183	5.0:1	<b>49 (5.6%)</b>	<b>137 (17.5%)</b>

\* Estimate for 2016, normally finalized in July  
Source: Ryerson University, Registrar's Office

# ***AND* Increased Quality of Admitted First Year Students**

## **As measured by:**

- Entering secondary school average grades
- Number of applicants with secondary school grades of 80% +
- Retention rates
- Graduation rates (likely, but too early to quantify)

**Some questions  
which can't be  
ignored**



# Is it (or should it be) the job of professors to recruit students? Does it make us salespeople?

- *What is the alternative?*

## In studying application and retention figures, what are the *next steps*?

- Collect additional data, especially on retention and graduation rates
- Explore the situation in other graphic communication programs, recognizing different circumstances, demographics, and finances
  - What approaches are working across comparable programs?
- Quantitative cost-benefit analysis
- Identify and share helpful strategies, with relative costs and benefits, with a goal of collaborating with other programs

# Thank You

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