

Opening New Instructional Sites: Four Best Practices to Support Success

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Establishing branch campuses to create additional access points for students in

different geographic areas is nothing new, but there are a few key steps leaders need to take to ensure their new site stands the test of time.

Whether you call it a satellite campus or off-site instructional location, offering education geographically distant from the “main” college campus has been a common practice among public community colleges and state universities for decades. This is also a common practice among private (not-for-profit and for-profit) colleges, especially those who offer programming for adult students.

Most colleges and universities expand their reach to new communities and populations of students through these off-site instructional locations. Below are three best practices that have shown to directly relate to the success of off-site locations.

1. Agreements with Local Colleges

Whether your institution is small and private or large and public, recruiting students will always be a top priority for a new location. Advertising and marketing can become quite expensive when you’re trying to establish your brand in a new place, but there are low- to no-cost options. One such approach is to establish partnerships with a local community college.

In recent years, community colleges have sought out articulation agreements with four-year institutions in order to provide transfer pathways for their graduates. Establishing articulation agreements will require the senior institution to review their transfer policies and compare their programs to the programs students are pursuing at the community college. The purpose of these articulation agreements is to simplify the transfer process. It would be in the senior institution’s best interest to review their transfer policies and determine how to better align with community college programs (i.e. adopt any state articulation agreements already in existence, add more courses to your transfer policy, create a course-by-course crosswalk, etc.). The benefit of these articulation agreements is that the community college will inform their students about these transfer opportunities and invite the senior institution on their campus to recruit.

2. Corporate Partnerships

Continuing on the trend of low- to no-cost methods to attract new students, leaders of satellite campuses should turn to local employers. After all, organizations want employees that have the skills necessary to excel in their positions and higher education’s purpose is to train individuals in the skill sets

needed in organizations today. Establishing partnerships with local employers will be mutually beneficial.

There are a few things to consider when seeking employer partnerships, however. You need to be familiar with the industry you are approaching, be prepared to discuss how your programs will benefit the organization and their employees, be open to discussing potential changes in curriculum to meet their needs and whether the institution will accept learning credit based on experience.

A successful employer partnership will demonstrate the institutions commitment to the community, leading to an increase in recruitment potential.

3. Community Relationships

When opening a new site location, one of the challenges that an institution initially faces is generating awareness within the community about the degree programs. So, it is critically important to create a network of support among the local businesses and non-profit entities.

Becoming a member of and getting involved with the chamber of commerce is an excellent way to generate brand awareness and to gain a better understanding of employers' needs. While there is a minimal fee to become a chamber member, the benefits outweigh the initial cost. Most chambers host a variety of events ranging from "Coffee and Connections" to "Business After Hours" providing an opportunity for multiple sectors of industry to engage in a casual setting which helps to foster ongoing relationships with key business leaders. Also, there are opportunities to sponsor events at your campus such as chamber meetings, professional development workshops, and corporate training. This allows the general public to engage with members of your staff while also familiarizing them with your services.

4. Exceptional Customer Service

Providing exceptional customer service is not something that is achieved by accident and should be intentional. Therefore, the processes and procedures at the site location must be specifically designed to accommodate the needs of adult learners or the populations of students served at that location. Examples of student-centered policies include responding to student's requests within 24

hours or sooner, having a single point of contact for academic advising, and providing orientation sessions for new students.

To support and ensure that your site location is implementing these best practices, an important component to focus on is offering professional development training for your staff. This includes conferences, workshops and seminars where they are exposed to the challenges and opportunities experienced at other institutions and how these scenarios can be applicable to your school. Even if budget constraints prevent sending the entire department, you can send one or two members of your staff to bring back the key ideas to be adapted at your institution. Not only does this energize the staff but it also ensures that your location is providing the best services possible to your student population.

Conclusion

While opening an off-site campus is becoming a standard practice in higher education, every institution will be faced with certain challenges during the process. However, establishing the institution's presence in the community will be key to ensuring the success of the new location.

Creating partnerships with the local community colleges and organizations will help launch recruiting opportunities by providing a direct path for students. As such, networking with community members and organizations will also increase the institutions new existence and provide brand awareness. With each of these areas, customer service will be the key to strengthening these relationships and should be strongly considered when developing operational processes, procedures and organizational culture.

Knowing the needs of your community and potential students will be essential in understanding how to best serve them which will subsequently lead to a successful satellite campus.

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