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UT Alumni Recruitment: The History of Alumni Involvement in Recruiting Students for the University of Tennessee and Recommendations for Future Success

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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT—APPROVAL

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I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Martha Masengill, Faculty Mentor

Date: 12/13/01

Comments (Optional):

"Nan did a very creditable job with this project. She interviewed a large pool of individuals who have been involved with this program over the years, and she made some very thoughtful and valuable suggestions for the future."
UT Alumni in Recruitment:

The history of alumni involvement in recruiting students for the University of Tennessee and recommendations for future success

Nan Dickerson

Martha Masengill, Mentor

December 13, 2001
Alumni of the University of Tennessee actively work to promote their alma mater by giving of their time and money. Recruiting students is a viable way to utilize alumni efforts. In 1984, the Volunteer Alumni Network was organized as a means for using alumni in recruitment. During its tenure, members of the VAN program have assisted with various recruitment activities, such as identifying potential high ability students, staffing information booths at college fairs, and hosting recruitment parties in their homes. In the past two years, the VAN program has been phased out, as the goals and strategies for recruiting students have been changed. Based on positive feedback from freshman Honors students, former Honors students, and VAN members, the Volunteer Alumni Network was an effective tool for reaching students with a positive message about the University of Tennessee. The following recommendations outline a plan for the ongoing service of alumni in recruitment.
INTRODUCTION

During my time as a student at the University of Tennessee, I became a member of the Student Alumni Associates. The motto of this organization is "students serving students—past, present, and future." To that end, the Associates assist the Office of Alumni Affairs with activities such as Homecoming, VAN parties, and scholarship dinners. While serving SAA as the Alumni Liaison, I had an opportunity to attend a VAN party at the home of former Chancellor Bill Snyder. Potential scholarship recipients and their parents were invited to this event. During the afternoon, the Honors Department shared important scholarship deadlines, Honors students spoke about campus life, and Admissions representatives answered general questions about UT. Alumni also mingled with the students and shared their collegiate stories. The event seemed to be a true fulfillment of SAA's motto, as it involved alumni, current UT students, and prospective Honors students.

As a senior, I served as president of Student Alumni Associates. During my term, I discovered that the activities of the VAN program had been phased out as the focus of recruitment strategies had changed. Because my interaction with VAN members and my experience at the party had been so positive, I chose to focus the efforts of my senior honors project on a plan of action for the revitalization of the VAN program. With that goal in mind, I interviewed former directors of the VAN program to understand its history, polled freshman honors students to research its impact, and talked with former VAN members to learn of their experiences. I also met with the Director of Admissions to learn how alumni might fit into the current recruiting strategies. As a result, I complied suggestions, which outline ways in which UT alumni can continue to be of service to their alma mater through recruitment.
The University of Tennessee is an excellent place to attend school. Its history as an outstanding university dates back to its founding in 1794. For 206 years, the alumni have kept the University of Tennessee legacy alive by donating thousands and, in recent years, millions of dollars each year and by sharing their collegiate stories with family and friends—some of whom may later attend UT and become a part of the legacy themselves. Eager to contribute to the success of their alma mater, alumni are a valuable resource for the University of Tennessee. This group of 175,000 people worldwide can be utilized to recruit the “best and brightest” students to build a wonderful future on top of yesterday’s successes.

The University of Tennessee National Alumni Association (UTNAA) began in 1836. Every graduate of the University of Tennessee system becomes a member of this group upon his graduation. There is no cost for membership, and there are no dues required to remain a member. The activities of the UT National Alumni Association span nationwide and its members span worldwide. Its programs and activities include Alumni Chapters, the Senior Gift Challenge, Alumni Summer College, the Annual Giving Program, Women’s Council, Student Alumni Associates, Reunions, Alumni Leadership Training and Development, Homecoming Activities, Alumni Awards, High school Relations, and Scholarship Events.

In 1984, the Volunteer Alumni Network was developed as one of the UTNAA’s programs. It began through the efforts of Martha Masengill, director of Alumni Affairs. VAN members were handpicked alumni who had been active in other programs or those
who had expressed an interest in student recruiting. The original group included approximately 200 members, representing all areas of the state of Tennessee and other major recruiting areas outside the state. Initially, alumni were called upon to identify high-ability high school students in their hometowns and communities. Alumni were asked to call potential students within their communities and encourage them to consider the University of Tennessee as a college choice. Reports on these interviews were returned to the Office of Alumni Affairs where staff members sorted through the information. The Office of Admissions received a copy of the completed paperwork; the college in which the student showed an interest received a copy; and Alumni Affairs filed a copy. Admissions and the individual colleges followed up by distributing the information of interest to the students.

Several months after this program began, Tom Wade, a VAN member from Union City, Tennessee, offered to host a reception in his home for the high-ability students in northwest Tennessee. Representatives from Alumni Affairs, the Office of Admissions, and the Honors program presented a short program. Food and beverages were served and approximately 25 students and their parents attended. The first VAN party had been born.

By 1987, the VAN program continued to grow under the leadership of Donna Bletner, a new director of Alumni Affairs and caretaker of the VAN program. While the program continued hosting VAN parties, the structure of the network itself continued to develop. Members of the network were invited to an annual training weekend each fall. The training day was held on Friday and included information sessions led by staff from
Alumni Affairs, Admissions, and the Honors department. On Saturday, the new members of the program attended a home football game together.

Over the course of the next decade, the VAN program continued to succeed. Approximately twenty in-state parties were held annually by the mid-1990s. During this growth period, the VAN program received letters from its members and from prospective students and their parents. The following excerpt was taken from a letter written by Natalie Spivey, a member of the freshman class of 1997.

Thanks to you and my last visit to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I have made UTK my top choice among colleges. I have never known that such esteemed college faculty (and retirees) could be so personable and concerned about a prospect student. Your concern for my future has impressed on my heart a feeling of gratefulness that I will never forget. I appreciate you giving your time for me and my future.

Neal Oldham, member of the freshman class of 1994, wrote his thanks to Tom Wade.

I would like to take this opportunity for thanking both you personally and the Volunteer Alumni Network for your contributions to my choice of schools. I will be a Tennessee Scholar majoring in Materials Science and Engineering, in which I have received a departmental scholarship. I believe that I might not have applied for admission to UTK or for these scholarships had not you contacted me on behalf of the VAN. Your personal attention made a decisive impact upon my decision to go to UTK and to try to prepare myself to the utmost.

Parents also wrote their thanks for the efforts made by alumni in the network. Members of the VAN program wrote Ms. Bletner with personal success stories, as well as requests for information concerning new aspects of UT life and for additional handouts or brochures for college fairs. Their letters often included names of outstanding students that UT should make special efforts to recruit.

In the late 1990s, Ms. Bletner conducted research on the success of the VAN program. This period of research continued under Phyllis Moore, who took over the directorship of the program in 1999. The following information concerning the program
was listed in the 1999/2000 annual report to the University of Tennessee National Alumni Association Board of Governors.

A number of surveys have shown that alumni have a definite influence on a student's choice of a college and that personal contacts are preferred over brochures and letters. In the UT freshman class of 1999, at least 287 students with an average ACT score of 27-36 were contacted through the VAN program, primarily through recruitment parties.

As the University of Tennessee crossed into 2000, it found budget constraints to be the number one problem it faced. In the light of a new millennium, change was a necessary part of every program. As new goals and strategies were developed, the VAN program was phased out. In an effort to reach a goal of recruiting National Merit scholars, large numbers of students were invited to recruitment parties in hotels and high schools. The small responses led to an end of recruitment parties altogether.

The new strategy for recruiting students is a nationwide focus. The spectrum for recruiting students has been broadened to include all students, rather than limiting efforts to focus on high-ability students. Enrolling students that have been admitted to the university is also identified as a key to the mission of recruitment. Admitted student receptions were created in 2000. Tennessee's larger cities and a few major, out-of-state locations became the venues for receptions held to congratulate students on their admittance to UT and to give them opportunities to meet their potential classmates at UT. Local alumni attended these receptions to act as hosts.

Beginning in 2001, alumni also were used at National College Fairs. Unlike local college fairs for which alumni efforts had always been utilized, these events were organized in cities with venues large enough to attract thousands of students. In cities outside of the Admissions Department's reach, alumni were called on to represent UT. In
preparation for these events, the Admission Office and the Office of Alumni Affairs prepared training videos, compiled training notebooks, gathered UT’s yearly mail outs and guidebook, and purchased UT button-down shirts and table runners.

In analyzing the history of the VAN program and the current conditions of the recruiting process at UT, there appeared to be some barriers to success when using alumni in recruitment efforts. First, the National Association for College Admission Counseling has a “Statement of Good Practice” to which all members must adhere. Offering incorrect information to prospective students is a potential liability to the university. In using alumni, training is essential. In addition, wrong answers and misinformation results in extra work for both Admissions and Alumni Affairs. Secondly, with every aspect of the University under financial scrutiny, money is extremely important. Using money to promote an ineffective means of recruiting is inefficient. Thirdly, time is a big factor. Time spent organizing, planning, conducting, and following up is vital time that cannot be squandered.

Despite these barriers, alumni are still a viable resource for recruiting. The job description of an alumni chapter president includes “to assist all university campuses in the identification of prospective students and to encourage area students to consider a UT campus as a choice for college study.” To recruit is an integral part of the alumni chapter’s role. Jack Billings, eight-year member of the VAN program described it this way,

There are many things I can’t do. I can’t do anything about the state legislature...and bad publicity, but this is something I can do. UT has given me so much. This has a direct bearing on UT. That’s why I do it. It’s the one of the few ways that I can give something back directly to the school other than money.
With attitudes, drives, and desires like these, it makes sense to funnel alumni’s energy, time, and money into such an important part of the University’s success.

Based on interviews with Alumni Affairs staff, Admissions staff, VAN members, and students who were recruited through the VAN program, the following suggestions arose as viable recommendations for the continued role of alumni in recruitment.

- **Conduct basic research.**

  Each summer, thousands of students and parents visit UT for freshman orientation. During the two day orientation sessions, 90% of the entering class of freshmen take entrance tests, go on campus tours, register for classes, learn about housing/dining/extracurricular activities, and get a brief glimpse of what campus life might be like. This is the only time that the freshman class is assembled as a whole. This orientation is a perfect opportunity to ask entering freshmen what made them choose UT. The survey could include questions like “Were you contacted by a UTK alumnus while making your college decision?” and “Did this contact influence your decision in a positive way?” This survey would not have to be limited to questions about alumni. It truly could be a chance to conduct some research on all recruitment tools and could be used to gauge the success of the strategy of Admissions from year to year. Another option for polling the freshman class is through the First Year Studies program. Fifty percent of all freshmen enroll in this class each fall. Freshman honors students also take part in a freshman honors seminar each fall. To find out how these scholarship recipients were convinced to attend UT, these classes might be polled as well.
Regardless of the tactical method used to do this research, measuring the success of recruitment approaches will be helpful in knowing what efforts, including the efforts make by UT alums, are most worthwhile.

During the course of this project, I polled 105 of the 168 freshman honors students in the entering class of 2000. The twelve-question survey included demographic questions. It asked students if any of their family members were UTK alumni and if those family alums contacted them while making the college decision. Of those with UTK alumni in their families, 92% were contacted by those family members. Of those contacted, 85% claimed that the contact influenced their decisions in a positive way. The survey also asked the freshmen if a UTK alumnus, other than a family member, contacted them while making the college decision. Only 29% of the students were contacted, but 87% recorded that this contact did influence their decisions in a positive way. This glimpse into the possibilities of alumni contact and the potential for VAN parties shows both the value of conducting some research in the target market, as well as the positive results which alumni contact had.

- Use alumni to reach the masses.

The University of Tennessee National Alumni Association is a unique organization; upon graduation from the University of Tennessee, every graduate becomes a member. Therefore, the number of members in this organization is large. The size of this great group has its advantages and disadvantages. Its great size is truly an advantage in reaching the masses.

In a meeting with Marshall Rose, Director of Admissions, he mentioned the importance of recruiting nationally, and even internationally, to reach the goal of being a
nationally ranked and recognized school of excellence. In the past two years, this goal has emerged as a target for UT; therefore, Admissions has adjusted its strategies in order to compete in terms of this target. As a result, UT has made an appearance in National College Fairs spanning from Baltimore, Maryland, to Miami, Florida, to Cincinnati, Ohio, with hopes of expanding further in the future. The distances to be traveled to attend these fairs and reach these goals create a strain on time and money, two limited resources. As mentioned previously, alumni were called upon to assist with some out-of-town venues. In order to spread farther and reach masses of students outside of the southeast, use the resources of this vast group. It is important not to limit alumni involvement outside of this region; however, utilize alumni across the country to identify top scholars and outstanding student leaders, as well.

Despite the large number of out-of-state and international alumni, the majority of UT grads are located in the state of Tennessee. Because there is a more concentrated group of potential students in Tennessee, in-state alumni can still be used. Their roles in recruiting students will be somewhat different from those in remote locations. In-state alumni may be called upon to focus on high-ability students or to help with the retention of admitted students, while those in remote locations can help reach the goal of extending the scope of recruitment at UT.

❖ Win at home.

While the goal of recruitment efforts at the University of Tennessee has been to obtain students who will lead to a nationally recognized public university, there must be success in Tennessee first. Winning at home lays a foundation for winning elsewhere. As mentioned in the explanation above, it is necessary to broaden our focus to include
new demographics; however, UT’s success in state speaks for the university in other areas. Luckily, many in-state alumni have been trained and have spent time working toward Admission’s recruitment goals. These organized alumni have become faithful believers in the cause at hand. They recognize the need and opportunity, too. As former Memphis/Shelby County Alumni President Jack Billings explained, “There is so much bad publicity coming out of UT right now. It puts a ‘brain drain’ on our good students. There are few opportunities to put a good foot forward.” Alumni can truly be a part of putting UT’s best foot forward across the state.

- **Focus effort on high ability students.**

As a state institution, all types of students are admitted and enrolled at UT each year. This mix of students provides a great learning environment both inside the classroom and outside in campus life. At the same time, it is important to enroll high ability students to UT. The best and the brightest students at UT only elevate the whole university. Test scores are easy identifiers of these students. At the same time, alumni can be useful in identifying high achievers. Leadership awards, high grade point averages, and involvement in extracurricular activities are also signs of the best students. Alumni have been used to help identify these students in the past. Once again, polling current Honors students will assist in the development of recruitment strategies for high ability students.

- **Give attention to parents of prospective students.**

Although the target audience of recruiting is the prospective student, it is important to remember to address parents’ concerns. Making parents comfortable with the choice to attend the University of Tennessee may pave the way for the student to
make this choice. Parents' questions and concerns may be different from their students' concerns. Who better to speak of this experience than UT alumni with children at UT? Many UT alumni are in unique positions to assist in this area. Although they can speak of their collegiate experiences, many of them are parents of UT students or UT alumni. Whether working a UT table at a National College Fair, hosting a VAN party, or attending an admitted student reception, alumni who are also parents of UT students should be used to speak of those experiences.

- **Distinguish UT.**

  Tennessee Scholar, Brian Shore, entered UT in 1998. As a senior, he reflected on his decision to attend UT. He explained, “Though costly, every opportunity that UT gets to interact with prospective students is valuable. Especially when the student feels like the school actually wants him as a person and not just a number.” The personal touch and intimate atmosphere of VAN parties capitalized on this technique.

  While National College Fairs reach “the masses,” VAN parties fill a different niche. Their purpose is not only to expose students to the idea of attending UT but also to share the reasons UT is an excellent choice.

  The structure of VAN parties lends itself to sharing more stories, more information, and a more personal feeling. First, students and their parents receive personal invitations to an event in the house of a local UT alumnus. Upon arrival, alums, current students, and UT staff greet students. While students are arriving, UT folks have an opportunity to mingle with the prospective students and their parents. After serving light refreshments and punch, the Office of Admissions, Honors Department, and the Office of Alumni Affairs make presentations. During this time, students are made aware
of pertinent scholarship information and application deadlines. They also have an opportunity to hear from current Honors students at UT. These personal stories add to the intimate atmosphere of a VAN party.

- **Take advantage of free opportunities.**

  At this time, money is a main concern within the university community. In a time when every budget has been cut and every penny has been pinched, it behooves all programs to take advantage of free opportunities. VAN parties are an opportunity for free publicity.

  First, the Office of Alumni Affairs and the individual VAN members absorb the cost of VAN parties. The invitations, transportation, and supplies are paid for by Alumni Affairs. The food and location fall under the VAN members’ responsibilities. Secondly, the organization of the program, including communication with VAN members and organization of the parties’ agenda, is handled by Alumni Affairs. The two time costs for Admissions are gathering the names for invitations and attending the parties themselves. With a group of able-bodied, willing alumni and an Office of Alumni Affairs that is willing to budget the monetary responsibilities, VAN parties are an extremely efficient way to recruit high ability students.

- **Interact with prospective students before recruiting begins.**

  The Williamson County Alumni Chapter hosts an annual Honors dinner. Each spring, the “Top 10” high school juniors and their parents are invited to attend a banquet to honor these students on their academic successes. Funding for the event comes from sponsors sought out by the Alumni chapter to underwrite the event. A UT alumnus, current UT student, and UT professor speak on their collegiate experiences at the
University. This is not a recruitment event, however. One UT Admissions representative attends the banquet to answer questions and to make available written material before or after the dinner. The event gives juniors an opportunity to meet the alumni chapter members of Williamson County, so the students have contacts for future questions once their college searches begin. Therefore, this event is truly a reward for the academians of the eight Williamson County high schools. It is also an excellent example of faithful alumni seeking out ways to assist their alma mater.

- **Continue to communicate with VAN members.**

  Even though recruitment efforts have changed focuses during the past two years, the members of the Network continue to be interested in assisting with recruiting at UT. Because the Volunteer Alumni Network has been an established part of the UTNAA for over 15 years, the program is recognized as a part of on-going alumni activities.

  For alumni who are becoming a part of recruitment efforts for the first time through National College Fairs and Admitted Student Receptions, being labeled a VAN member is inclusive and gives them a sense of belonging to the Alumni Association. It also might be helpful for them to know the history of the VAN program and other ways they can be involved. For alumni who have been involved in VAN activities since its inception, receiving information about current recruiting efforts keeps them connected to the network and to the changes the University is undergoing.

  Continuing education is an important reason to keep communication open with the Volunteer Alumni Network. New facts and figures are produced about the University each year. As the cost of tuition changes or the University’s national ranking goes up, VAN members should be contacted. When these members are called upon to volunteer
for recruiting events, Admissions and Alumni Affairs are not rushed to train these members. Instead, facts, figures, and procedures can be shared regularly with VAN members.

- Use email.

An easy way to communicate with volunteers is via email. A monthly email newsletter to VAN members would be a cost-efficient way to provide quick, readable information. For those VAN members who do not have access to email, a printed copy of the email might serve the purpose as well. When recruiting tactics are faced with additional changes, this email network might be an easy way to gain feedback from the most active, knowledgeable VAN members. It also might evolve into a low cost method for sending training material and continuing education information to members.

- Learn of alumni interests and maximize those talents.

Rochelle Nelson, the Assistant Director of Admissions, works on Alumni Recruitment activities for the Office of Admissions. She attended the 200 Annapolis Institute, which focuses on “how to effectively organize and use alumni in the recruitment of students.” One of the ideas she gleaned from the Institute was surveying all alumni to identify their specific areas of interest. Samples of other universities’ alumni surveys included questions about the success of previous recruitment programs and asked alumni to specify which activities might interest the alumnus in the future. The UT questionnaire could poll UT alumni nationwide to find out if they would be interested in representing UT at a national college fair, in identifying outstanding students, in writing congratulatory notes to students who have been accepted to UT, in hosting a recruitment party in their homes, in attending an admitted student reception, or
in calling prospective students. The questionnaire might also ask if alumni would be willing to participate in training for recruiting activities. Alumni might also have suggestions for ways in which their communities could benefit from the local Alumni chapter's recruiting efforts.

- **Use young alumni.**

  Each year, the University graduates several thousand students. These recent graduates have current stories to share. Because they have only recently graduated, these alums may not have money to donate to their alma mater. Time, however, may be a resource they are willing to give. For this reason, young alumni should be utilized to staff college fairs, attend admitted student receptions and phone prospective students. It is important for these graduates to feel connected to the National Alumni Association. Getting these new grads involved in alumni activities may provide future monetary resources for the University, as well. These alumni especially are likely to be accessible by email, so training and communicating with them would be easier and cost-effective.

- **Elicit student leaders' participation before they graduate.**

  Student Alumni Associates, UT Ambassadors, and Orientation Leaders promote UT in their extracurricular time at school. They are informed students with positive stories to share. They are excellent resources on whom to focus for future support and a great way to build an active group of young alumni.

  For sixteen years, the Volunteer Alumni Network has focused its efforts on seeking out and recruiting the best and the brightest students to attend the University of Tennessee. Because such a group exists, is organized, and is prepared to help, it would be beneficial to the University to accept their volunteerism in every way possible. The
Office of Admissions develops recruiting strategies based on planning and research; however, the alumni volunteers can surely augment those efforts. By working collectively toward a common goal, the recruitment efforts of the University of Tennessee can truly be a success.
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