

A Framework for Effective Recruiting for Breaking Through Colleges

By Kristina Cowan

America's higher-education system is experiencing a sea change. Student demographics are shifting, posing new challenges for educators. According to a [report](#) by the American Council on Education, just one in six undergraduates is a "typical" 18-year-old enrolled at a residential campus, staying for four years, and graduating with a baccalaureate degree.

Adult students 25 and older are becoming the new majority, the report notes, and for many—especially low-income adults—myriad challenges and hurdles stand in the way of their academic success. One of the challenges to educators in helping low-income adults succeed lies in communicating with them, making sure they land in a place within a college that is geared to help them do well. The Breaking Through initiative is designed to provide such a place, but recruiting students into the program has proven challenging for a number of colleges.

Because Breaking Through is so new, faculty and staff have less experience recruiting for it than for typical courses or degrees. The initiative's complexities require colleges to convey a bigger picture that is tricky to explain succinctly and difficult for listeners to immediately grasp.

What can Breaking Through colleges do, then, to improve recruiting?

A good place to start is with the shared experiences of BT colleges. They all are striving to refine and adjust recruiting strategies so more students take part. Though they have different strategies, there are common threads in what each institution is doing, and the framework below reflects some of those commonalities.

What follows is a five-step guide for crafting an outreach strategy. It is designed to help colleges get students into an adviser's office and interested in Breaking Through, and it includes recruiting-related questions and suggestions based on experiences of several BT colleges. BT staff should use this to launch brainstorming discussions, and feel free to expand on any part of it.

- 1. The target demographic.** While it might seem obvious that the demographic for all Breaking Through colleges is low-income individuals, it is helpful to map out the specifics of that demographic in your community. For example, the low-income population in your city or county may comprise mostly immigrants who need to learn English. To get a clearer picture of these individuals, some questions you can ask are:

- Who are the people you are trying to reach?
- How will you come face-to-face with low-income adults?
- Are you communicating in their native language, such as Spanish?
- Are you communicating with them through people they trust?
- Are you offering them something of value?
- Can they see the value of what you are offering based on what you are telling them?

2. Networking. It is critical for Breaking Through staff to form liaisons within their colleges, and with individuals and organizations in the community surrounding the college. Once others believe Breaking Through is valuable, they will be more likely to help spread the word and make student referrals.

- *College faculty and staff.* When it comes to convincing others about the merits of Breaking Through, some staff and faculty say the hardest sells are peers at their own institutions. While some have come around to support the initiative, it did not happen overnight—underscoring the importance of regular, frequent contact with peers, who can include:
 - Counselors
 - Faculty, especially developmental education, GED, ESL and ESOL faculty
 - Staff at an office for students with disabilities
 - Staff at an office or resource center for women
- *Students.* Current Breaking Through students are another invaluable recruitment and networking resource: Their word-of-mouth referrals are powerful and can spur new students to take an interest in the initiative. Meet with current students and ask them questions, such as:
 - How did you learn about Breaking Through?
 - What attracted you to BT and ultimately convinced you it would meet your needs?
 - Do you think BT has a high profile on campus? If not, how would you suggest raising awareness of the initiative among more students?
 - Would you consider spreading the word about BT to other students not enrolled in the program and not aware it exists?

Answers to these questions will help you tailor your recruiting efforts, keeping what works, discarding what does not and adding strategies you might not have considered.

- *Community organizations.* Find groups in your community working with the target demographic and forge a relationship with the program managers. Call and e-mail them, and if time allows, arrange face-to-face meetings to discuss Breaking Through and potential collaboration. Consider attending community-based meetings, as well, where you can meet low-income individuals. Some community-based organizations to consider are:
 - Sites for after-school programs
 - YMCA/YWCA
 - Churches, temples, mosques and other religious organizations
 - Welfare offices
 - Corrections offices
 - Community learning centers
 - Groups that work with immigrants
 - Groups that work with Spanish-speaking populations
 - Local high schools (?)
 - Community job fairs (?)

3. Media and communications. There are a variety of media you can use to spread the word about Breaking Through, from basic flyers and print publications to newspaper advertisements, from the Internet to radio. Consider the following questions, suggestions and examples of what BT colleges are doing.

- What do low-income individuals listen to, watch and read?
 - What are the ethnic media in your community?
 - Do you need to translate your promotional materials into another language?
 - Is the Internet a viable way to reach your target demographic?
- *Basic promotional materials.* Start with promotional pieces such as brochures and flyers to pique the interest of potential students and referrers. Referral forms and admissions applications also are important to have on hand. Include contact information for BT staff and links to any Web-based information. You can share these materials with faculty, staff and students, placing them in prominent places throughout your school, such as advisers' offices and testing centers. Portland Community College says integrating BT program information into its Compass testing centers was a step in the right direction. Students receive notes on their test-score printouts, explaining that they qualify for BT and how to contact the campus adviser. Give promotional materials to community organizations, too, and leave extras behind.

- *Orientations.* Hold orientations to introduce potential students to the program and answer questions. Several colleges say they host small orientations where they can “connect” with newcomers—the more connected potential students feel to people at the college, the more likely they are to sign up for Breaking Through.
- *Newspaper ads.* Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland runs newspaper ads touting their program, and places an RSVP line in the ads. The school then has an orientation for the individuals who reply to the ads—a useful way of attracting students and gauging the ads’ success. To reach Spanish-speaking populations, place ads in local Hispanic media.
- *Radio, TV and Web ads.* Time permitting, research the costs of radio, TV and Internet ads, and the stations and sites frequented by your target demographic, which will help you place strategic ads. You might even advertise in Spanish on Spanish-speaking stations and Web sites.
- *The Internet.* Consider setting up a Breaking Through Web site specific to your school. If a separate site is too labor-intensive, you can add information about BT to an Intranet or portal system your school already has established.

4. Making strong connections with low-income adults. A number of colleges say it is essential for BT staff to be approachable and supportive during the recruiting process. BT advisers at Portland Community College, for example, say making strong connections with potential students—determining their needs and interests, and showing genuine concern for their success—is vital to successful recruiting. “People connect with people, so you have to have people connect on a level where students can understand. That’s true for any college,” explains Merry Boyd-Bunch, a BT adviser at PCC’s Southeast Center. Some points to consider:

- Are BT staff/advisers at your college discussing the idea of making connections with potential students?
- How can you make sure this concept of connectedness is a central theme during recruiting?

5. Allowing ample time and resources for recruiting. This is a critical piece of the puzzle: If you are rushed or unable to devote the time and manpower necessary for effective recruiting, the program will suffer. PCC advisers were squeezed during their first recruiting season: They had to come up with the inaugural group of students in two months’ time while also holding different full-time jobs at the school. A stunted timeframe meant a stunted recruiting strategy. During the second term, however, they had more time, which enabled them to improve their recruiting strategy.

Pamlico Community College in North Carolina has opted to hire a part-time recruiter whose sole job will be finding students. Ideally, says Clark Dimond, Pamlico's dean of institutional advancement, the recruiter will spend most of his/her time scouring the surrounding community.

To avoid time-and-resource constraints that compromise recruiting, consider these questions:

- How much time will you need to effectively recruit for your program? Weeks? Months?
- How many people will you assign to do recruiting?
- What percentage of their time (in addition to other job responsibilities) will be spent on recruiting?