

Ep. 061: Recruitment and Retention - Fall 2020 Edition

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It takes more than just an ace team of enrollment managers to meet students' needs on a campus like ours. Faculty play a role in students' choices to come to, or return to, Illinois State. Dr. Jana Albrecht, Associate Vice-President for Enrollment Management, talks about how instructors impact these important decisions. She and Jim also discuss ISU's plans to pilot a "Test Optional" application process for new student applicants starting in the fall.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

JANA: I'm Jana.

JIM: Let's talk teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee and joining me today is Dr. Jana Albrecht, she's the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management. Hi Jana.

JANA: Hi Jim. Happy to be here I'm, I'm so excited to chat with our new faculty and all faculty in fact about recruitment and retention today as you.

JIM: This is going to be great and as you kind of alluded to, we're doing this in time for our new faculty orientation which CTLT facilitates for the university but it's really a bunch of people from all across campus coming in to not only welcome new faculty, but to also kind of tell them about life. As part of the ISU community and enrollment and recruitment and retention are all such important parts of life at ISU and it's something that more than just staff members play a part. Right.

JANA: Absolutely. And I would say that the one thing if, if they get anything out of this conversation between the two of us at all, it's the faculty are so important in recruitment and in retention. So, you know, they expect sort of the groups in EMAS that are predominantly in those admissions events or the recruitment events they expect those admission staff and the financial aid staff U-College staff to tell them great things about the university, but we often, what we often find is that they'll tell us that they met with a faculty member in their department, and that's what really sold them on the institution because they have the same passion in about the same topics in whether it's about their research they're going to do or, or civic engagement. It's oftentimes that faculty presence and that connection that those students make that, make them, make that final decision to come to the University.

JIM: So, we're also talking about this not only in the context of New Faculty Orientation, getting ready to, to start, but obviously this, we're recording this in the summer of 2020. It's late July right now as we're recording this, and we're still in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic. So, obviously, it goes without saying that, from your perspective and in your job, this is a year unlike any other.

JANA: It, absolutely, so I, I'm a numbers geek through and through. Undergrad was a math major so, you know, I love to look at the data in the numbers and even the numbers aren't, aren't playing out exactly how they had in prior years, but that's probably not what our new faculty are wanting to chat about. We actually learned a lot of really great things about having to move things online and move things to a virtual platform. So, it'll, it will make us better, I think, eventually, in the long run to have this other platform to be able to recruit and to retain students. But students, they're actually loving the one on one zoom meetings with our admission staff or financial aid staff and so I can imagine that faculty had a little taste of that in the spring, but you know I think we can still remain connected, and as and having this team approach to recruitment and retention through things like zoom, or you know one on one meetings with students that they may not ordinarily get in a typical school year. So, and we had to do at ISU anyway, we pride ourselves in the fact that we are a very team centered institution and as far as recruitment and retention goes. We really rely on everybody at the institution to do both of those things. It's, it will be easy for us. And when students come to campus to understand our kind of culture in our campus community. It's harder when you're trying to do that through an online platform right I mean the videos are great that are on our websites, but we're really going to have to be deliberate in getting that one on one connection with prospective students and with continuing students, but you know our faculty are up for that challenge and I have, you know, all the, all the respect for them in the world that they're going to be able to deliver the kind of education that our students have come to, to expect and enjoy.

JIM: I think you also you know you mentioned a good point which I think translates into a lot of different aspects of campus life, which is that it's never going to be entirely the way it was ever again I think this zoom thing or meeting synchronously online, even once a vaccine is in the field and we're able to get together, face to face a little bit more responsibly. There is still a you know students do like to sort of interaction and we're kind of seeing that on the teaching side as well. So, I think that's an interesting point that you make. So, we can't really talk about specific numbers for fall because they haven't actually matured yet. Generally speaking, though, over the, over the last several years, enrollments been fairly stable at ISU, hasn't it? And maybe the population has changed a little bit, and certainly we have goals but largely it has been a pretty stable sort of thing.

JANA: Absolutely. And I'm glad you bring that point up because oftentimes you'll see in the media that they have a tendency to focus on declining enrollment, enrollment in the state of Illinois, and we try and get our, our information out there on a regular basis, but for the last 10 years we really have remained in between 20,000, 21,000 students, which is quite, you know, an accomplishment again speaking to our team approach, and the fact that everybody on campus is willing to recruit and retain those students, but we've been very lucky, especially with, you know, the budget declines that we went through, and some of the issues that other institutions in Illinois have had with enrollment, we've really been able to leverage what we bring to a student in the value of their education at ISU, and students have continued to select, you know, I assume to come and in fact, our fall 2019 class was our largest in 33 years. So, we had over 3800 incoming freshmen, and in other really good news, we, this will be a, you know, little quick clip into what we think we're going to report to you on 10th day. But we think

our retention rate is probably going to be up three or four percentage points and with a large class you may not necessarily expect that that might be the case but, and you know the institution is working really hard to recruit, retain students, and we always have, but I'm pretty proud of the fact that, you know, we have maintained that steady enrollment, and I really think, even though this year will be different because I do think we have students that are going to the community college, or they might take you know a gap semester until they're a little more reassured of what's going on with the virus, but you know I think even this fall term will be over 20,000 students. What we won't hit our record-breaking year for incoming freshmen or record-breaking year for, for incoming transfers, I do think our graduate population we will probably be level we might be a little bit up and for those students so I'm feeling pretty good about it, given where we are and the situation that we've been in, but we'll see what 10th day brings.

JIM: Well, and that's certainly welcome news and not just overall for the institution but also, you know, from a faculty standpoint, it's nice to know that we're going to have students to work with if that makes sense. It's nice to know that that, you know, for many years, Dr Dietz our president at Illinois State has used the phrase strong and stable.

JANA: Mm hmm.

JIM: There is, there's comfort in that stability isn't there? So, now that we've talked about the recruitment aspect of, of students, let's talk a little bit more about retention in particular. What do you hear from students in your interactions with them that you think faculty need to know?

JANA: So, what I would say is that we recruit, primarily students from Illinois, right, but even across, Illinois, you have students from different areas of the state, and you have students that come from high schools that are probably, we would consider those high schools maybe a less regular rigorous curriculum. So, you have students from different low socio-economic, you know statuses. You have all kinds of students in the same classroom. And so, I think it's particularly important for us to faculty members to try and figure out early on. Do I need to reach out to students that might be struggling, so maybe they, they didn't get a good grade on the first two exams Is there something that the faculty member can do to encourage them either go to tutoring, or, you know, how can I help or is there a group that gets to together have students to talk about the class and how to be successful. So, I hear from some students that they, they didn't quite understand how to be successful in college right away right so they needed those extra nudges either from faculty or from, you know, the tutoring center but equally as important is to encourage I think those students to get this out of classroom experience, you know, so if they're involved in a business organization if they're in involved in Black Student Union if they're involved in something that is outside of the classroom that is important to them. That helps solidify this community experience for them so while it's a lot faculty, and I would say that if they if they have a faculty person that they've really grown attached to that that's going to solidify the fact that they're going to retain and that they're going to graduate. but they, they have to have both of those components to be successful, for it to enjoy college you know in the in the fullest

way that they particularly can, but faculty are in both respects important for success in the classroom but then also for encouraging that outside of classroom experience.

JIM: And I think that that sometimes as instructors we tend to focus on the classroom I mean certainly there are a lot of instructors on campus who have worked in service learning or other aspects of community engagement or whatnot into their teaching, but we tend to, we tend to think of the students are ours when they're here, or when they're doing the homework for us. And then we kind of forget about them otherwise but they but students I don't think mentally divide up their day like that. So, we were, we were talking before we started recording this today that we both have day jobs on campus, but we also have teaching assignments that will pick up on occasion so this fall, I'm going to be teaching. COMM 110 the, the basic speech course. So, I'm really excited to be working with incoming freshmen again. What are you planning to teach and how are you rethinking it in light of not only the pandemic but also the information that you get during your day job I mean how does recruitment and retention and enrollment efforts affect the way that you teach.

JANA: Well, I, I love teaching the class because he you know you get this built in focus group, it's not that we focus on that, but you do get to hear daily or regularly for me I only teach one credit hour, a semester so it's you know just the one, one hour a week but you know I ask them questions what's important to them. What are they, what are they learning, what are they, what do they want to get out from their college experience and I talk a lot about how the topics that we're talking about in class are going to shape their futures and whether that future they want to talk about their career and how we're discussing leadership that day how that particular topic is going to help them be a better and more effective leader, once they leave the institution as well as while they're, they're here, and you know we in that particular honors mindset seminar we talk a lot about you know so called growth mindset and what that means, and I love listening to students because they come up with ideas that you haven't even thought of, and lots of times we can use those ideas to help them to help them perform better in the classroom to help us perform better, and they'll tell me you know what they liked or what they didn't like all throughout the semester and lectures and I give them the freedom to do that in the classroom. So, I'm like did you like this author you know what did you like what did you not like so they teach me a lot in those one hour a week time slots, that they probably don't know, but I really, really appreciate it, and the feedback. And they're fun Jim, they're fun.

JIM: They're fun and if you just perfectly summarize what one of the enjoyable intangibles is of being a teacher, which is that you get taught by the students as much as you teach them. It's not a one-way street at all. So, one other quick change that's happened this year that I wanted to ask you about was this idea of, I think the phrase I've heard is test optional meaning that the admissions tests, or how we're using those are changing. Could you go into that a little bit?

JANA: Sure can. So, we decided in actually early on in the summer, we were concerned about students being able to take that the ACT and the SAT, and we didn't really want you know we had some reassurance that testing might open back up in July, well then you know that doesn't happen and then is testing going to be in the schools and how soon

are they going to be able to do that well we opened admission, on September 1. So, we didn't want students to have to wait until the end of October or until the middle of November, and that the fact that we have heard from our state legislators that they're really wanting institutions to take a look at test optional and what that would mean for their institution. So, we did a lot of research with other institutions that have gone test optional you know we looked at, at what had happened at those institutions and we do like some of the things that that can come from that kind of a policy. So, the more we talked about it we just thought, well, we'll do at least one year of the test optional. And we'll assess you know what happens so do we get more applications do we get a more a larger pool of underrepresented students that are applying to our institution because you know those are the some of the things that we heard other school saying were the benefits. And so, we know that in some majors it's a little bit more difficult to go test blind, so, we're not test blind we're test optional, you know if students submit the test score. We will use it in the admission process, but we are still kind of working through what is that going to mean for us.

JIM: Right.

JANA: So we have seven processors, who are likely going to process, 16,000 some odd undergraduate applications. So, we still have to figure out ways to look at the transcript look at the high school GPA and look at the information that they put on the essay and really do more of a holistic review of... Is this student likely to be able to come to campus and to be successful. So, we've gone through lots of different conversations with lots of different groups of people. And we're working on that but we're excited, you know we, we don't necessarily know some of the students that we have not admitted in the past if they could have been successful or not, you know, you don't admit that group of students with lower ACT and SAT scores. You know we don't really know so we're excited to maybe be able to admit some students that, that, we haven't been able to admit the past, and at the same time, you know, we want to make sure we have resources to back up. You know those particular students if they need that extra help so we're, we're excited. We think we'll see a lot of great things from the test optional policy and, you know, then we'll have lots of other discussions about whether that's going to be something that will do permanently moving into the future but...

JIM: So just to be clear, as a pilot, this is going to be for students who would be coming in, in the fall of 2021 is that right?

JANA: Correct. You know I should also mention the test optional. We are being very clear with students that that that submitting a test score can only help them. We're really going to try and admit students based on classroom experience high school GPA and the courses that they've already taken. So, as an entire community. We do a really great job of recruiting and retaining students. And it's because we have that team approach and because we have so many people that are willing to talk about the institution and tell students. You know what they really like, and even alums I mean we have all kinds of people that help us recruit, and we have tons of student, students, that go out and teach you know we're a large Education School, so all of our teachers are out there in their communities telling, telling students about that but you know I

love the institution. I've been here for 20 years and part of the thing that I love the most is that, that team approach.

JIM: Jana, thank you so much.

JANA: Thanks, Jim, this has been great.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more about enrollment, retention, and the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, go to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. For Dr. Jana Albrecht, for all of my colleagues here at CTLT, until we talk again: happy teaching!