CONFESSIONS OF A GRADUATE STUDENT RECRUITER

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At one time or another, most faculty have had some degree of involvement with the graduate recruiting process—a blend of sensitivity training, database management, and triathlon competition. While it is a critical part of any department's operation, recruiting can also be time consuming, rewarding, and incredibly frustrating.

This article is dedicated to those unselfish souls who respond to the recruiting call, survive the process, and move on to bigger and better things—say, the library committee. It is also dedicated to those unsung heroes, the graduate secretaries, who make the process work in spite of faculty involvement. It is a fictional account of the typical recruiting process and is based on numerous conversations with colleagues at various universities. I hope that both faculty and students can relate to some of the situations described herein.

▷ *April 16th*

10:00 AM • The day starts innocently enough. The evening before had been a long one, finishing the tax returns and getting to the post office at 11:58 PM. Now its time to get down to finishing out the semester and catching up on papers and proposals.

Then it happens! (The magnitude of the moment will only be remembered as a dull ache for years to come.) The department Head's secretary calls and says that the Head wants to talk to you about a matter of utmost importance—but she won't reveal what that "matter" is (for reasons that become clear later). Aha! Your threats to up and take that (nonexistent) offer from the University of Mars have finally come to fruition—your thoughts turn to dollar signs and other visions of equal grandeur. Finally, your day has come.

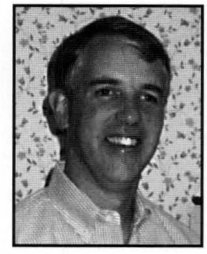
4:30 PM • You enter the Head's office and are welcomed by an overabundance of sincerity and a little too much good will—you are reminded of the last time you bought a used car. Then the speech begins, and your mind starts to signal an all-points bulletin . . . but it is too late. You are told that Professor Smith, who has handled the graduate recruiting efforts for the past three years, has asked to be given a different service responsibility. This is the same person who gradually lost all grant support over the past few years and who has exhibited especially bizarre behavior of late—every time he hears the phone ring or the e-mail beep, he dives behind his desk. For a while, it was amusing to see him intercept graduating seniors in the hall and offer prizes to those for whom he was unable to guess their GRE scores—the fact is that he seldom had to deliver. But you sensed there were problems when you saw him trying to choke the Peterson's guide representative last month.

The speech drones on—you catch bits and pieces of it as your mind drifts to thoughts of lost weekends and extended games of phone tag and e-mail floating in cyberspace. You hear how the department needs you to take on the graduate recruiting job, but when you sputter and mention alternative faculty choices you are told that you are without doubt the best person; you have such charisma, such people skills, such organizational abilities. Since your mind still entertains its earlier thoughts of grandeur, these words of praise seem appropriate—but you *know* something is wrong, something doesn't quite ring true. "The department needs you!" you hear.

Well before you know it, you have bought that used car. (It is only much later that you find you were actually the eighth option.)

▷ *April 17th*

You take a break and head down to the main office to check your mail. You are astonished to find the mailbox full of airmail envelopes from every corner of the world. (Why didn't you keep up that childhood stamp collection?) As you



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inspect the envelopes you find that students from thirty-seven different countries have addressed their letters asking for graduate school application material to you *personally.* News certainly travels fast!

You also find that faculty put any overseas mail they receive, addressed to them, into your box—unopened. This means you must spend at least an hour separating entreaties for postdoc positions from graduate school application requests. Ever the diligent recruiting coordinator, you begin reading—each and every letter. You find that you are soon able to distinguish cultures by the absence or presence of the word "keen" in the letters. You look at the clock after a bit and are astonished to find that it's already 6:00 PM. (It looks like you'll have to use your engineering training to design a system that allows you to eat and sleep at some point every twenty-four hours!)

This article is dedicated to those unselfish souls who respond to the recruiting call, survive the process, and move on to bigger and better things—say, the library committee.

▷ *May 15th*

You turn in your final grades and get through another graduation. By now, you have received 7 requests for application materials from U.S. students and 387 from international students. (You figure that over time a better balance will probably develop.) In an effort not to leave any stone unturned in the search for the best students, you tell your secretary to mail applications to all those who have written—and you are informed that if the current pace is maintained, by July 9th the postal charges will drain the departmental discretionary account for the next fiscal year.

▷ *June 8th*

You check to see what your secretary is sending to prospective applicants, only to find that the departmental brochure is miserably out-of-date. (The tip-off is that you have been to the retirement dinners of several former students pictured in the brochure.)

▷ *June 11th*

You corner the department Head in the hallway (for some reason, he has been avoiding you since that last meeting!) and ask who can be given the task of revising the departmental brochure—and it happens again! The Speech, Part II. Just when you thought you had mastered the art of handling two day jobs, you find yourself wishing you had been on the high-school yearbook staff. With absolutely no experience in advertising, photography, artwork, or editing, you now have the job of putting together a document that must glorify all the wonderful aspects of the department and its programs to the point of attracting students and colleagues to its doors. (Given the low verbal GRE and TOEFL scores of some of the prospective students, you ponder using pictures and road signs to get the points across.)

▷ *July 19th*

By now, your secretary has become adept at screening the mail. Unfortunately, her standards are considerably higher than yours. The good news is that mailing costs have been slashed—but the bad news is that the potential applicant pool is now five (5). You decide to form a graduate admissions committee.

▷ *August 1st*

The first meeting of the graduate admissions committee is held. The members reluctantly agree to help. The posturing begins; the strategy is clear—pump up the number of potential students in their own areas while practicing the fine art of creative incompetence. (Let's face it; they probably heard the "Speech" too, but were clever enough to invoke sufficient professional and/or personal reasons to avoid the job. Their only mistake was in being too sincere, or being untenured, and that's why they are on the committee!)

▷ *August 19th*

Your memo to faculty requesting short research descriptions for the brochure you are working on gets responses from two faculty. A second reminder is sent out.

▷ *September 8th*

The new semester is well underway. Your recruiting efforts have slowed down, although the volume of mail is still heavy. Over dinner you tell the family its been a great day; you have finally figured out how to open those little blue envelopes from international students in such a way that you can still make out the academic credentials afterwards. Your spouse wonders if you are losing it. (Just wait until spring!)

▷ *September 14th*

After seven memos to faculty concerning the need for departmental brochure information, you now have a 50% response. Calling this a critical mass, you schedule photographers for the brochure pictures. You meet with the photographer and learn just how much hassle this is going to be—you've never worked with an "artist" before. In fact, you learn that faculty members and artists have much in common—"discerning" is probably the most diplomatic description.

Laboratory shots pose a real problem; you must steer clear of any and all safety violations while photographing. So, instead you decide to bring some beakers full of colored

solutions into the front office and grab passing graduate students to pose for the pictures. When the proofs come back, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that the students are wearing their safety glasses. The bad is—it looks like they are mixing tropical fruit rum punch for the departmental secretaries.

▷ *September 26th-28th*

You spend several days with the photographer taking faculty pictures and quickly learn there are two types of individuals on the faculty: those who don't care what their picture looks like, and those who try to capture the moment.

After blowing two days of your time on this endeavor, you strongly suggest that all faculty just give you their high school yearbook picture, which will then be retouched to bring out their years of experience.

▷ *October 23rd*

It suddenly occurs to you that you have no idea how many students to recruit, so you conduct a survey. You ask faculty for estimates on the numbers of new students wanted for their groups and the number they expect they'll be able to support. Unfortunately, no strong correlation results. In fact, you estimate that if the number of students "wanted" were met, it would require that the department receive all funds available this year from NSF.

An engineering estimate is used.

▷ *November 3rd*

You have now received a 75% response to the brochure memo (after 23 reminders). In desperation, you threaten to write the missing summaries yourself. This threat is taken seriously by one colleague—you receive his 37-page summary with eight figures and photographs.

▷ *November 10th*

You go to the annual AIChE meeting and exchange information with recruiting coordinators from other departments. You can get a good idea of how they feel about your graduate program by the quality of their own undergraduates that they recommend. Most frequently heard comment: "His (or her) GPA does not reflect his (or her) true capability." It seems like you have been plugged into the national chapter of Underachievers Anonymous. You begin to develop a deep cynicism for any sentence containing the word "potential."

▷ *November 20th*

You have received approximately 8,000 application requests by now; most also ask several questions pertaining to the program. The volume of mail is bad enough, but then you are reminded that your e-mail address was sent out with the departmental mailings. Welcome to the information highway! You receive more e-mail messages than your computer can store, causing it to regularly crash. You have heard Eudora play that little jingle when e-mail arrives so often that you expect it to be nominated for a Grammy.

▷ *December 17th*

You turn in your semester grades and try to catch up on paper and proposal writing. It turns out that this is the time of the year when graduating seniors suddenly realize that life as they know it will end next May. You receive 300 phone calls a day from prospective graduate students starting semester break.

▷ *January 2nd*

The bowl games are over, the relatives have left, and the recruiting season is about to swing into high gear. Applications come flowing in, and all but one of the first one hundred request waivers of the application fee. Either they say they can't afford it or they infer that they are doing you a favor by applying. In any case, it seems like it might take the remaining departmental budget to pay the fees.

▷ *January 10th*

You generate a list of applicants to begin making admissions decisions. But you find that the database you developed to organize the information has a serious flaw—the applicants can be sorted in only two ways: alphabetically by their first name, or in descending order by their zip codes.

▷ *January 18th*

Your admissions committee meets for the first time to go over the applicants. One member thinks that all on the list should be admitted, in contrast to another member who thinks that none should. You try to explain to the committee that "number of publications" is not really a factor at this point in the applicants' careers.

▷ *February 1st*

The first round of offers is determined. You start making calls to give the applicants the good news and to invite them to visit. After a morning of calling, you begin to think that there might be a connection between applicants' potential and the nature of the greeting played on their answering machines. You imagine the look on their parents' faces if they heard some of these messages. Inevitably, if you reach an applicant, they are asleep—no matter the time of day. You begin to sympathize with hotel operators responsible for wake-up calls.

▷ *February 15th*

The first group of applicants visits to see the campus and meet the faculty. At breakfast, you describe the program and its many attributes, and then ask for questions—the most

frequent query concerns the distance from the nearest beach.

One student makes seventeen trips to the breakfast buffet; another orders a large pizza; yet another drinks fifteen cups of coffee, which you guess might be connected to the enormous mini-bar bill the hotel called you about. One student thinks she is at a different school. But most troubling is the one student who has yet to show up for breakfast. Your only thought is to somehow keep smiling.

▷ *February 16th*

One of your own students, who is hosting the group, calls to tell you what a great time they all had the night before. You are tempted to ask what they did, but decide it is better left alone. Apparently there were no arrests and no one was injured.

▷ *February 27th*

A major snowstorm hits the east coast and the Midwest. Travel arrangements for fifteen visiting students have now been completely canceled. You stay glued to the Weather Channel to keep apprised of the storm's progress. You find that most of the students are stranded at some remote stopover and can't get to your city, so you suggest to the Department Head that maybe you could rendezvous with them in, say, Miami, to extol the virtues of the program. But, bad news—Hurricane Albert is also on the way. Oh well, maybe setting up an internet connection between the flight lounges at the various airports will work.

▷ *March 20th*

Several of your applicants call to tell you they have won NSF Fellowships, and they want to know how this will affect their stipend. Another school has offered to triple the stipend originally offered, but you quickly figure out that won't work for your department—the stipend would then exceed the salary of several associate professors, including their summer salaries. So, you point out all the "psychic" benefits associated with attending your institution and how people shouldn't concern themselves with material things. The student isn't buying this, however, so you propose an annual "bonus" that you think is reasonable. The student asks if this is per month.

▷ *March 30th*

One of your recruits is a basketball player at a Division I school, and he asks to visit between tournament games. He comes, and the visit is going great until the local news station calls to ask if you realize you have violated NCAA recruiting guidelines, mentioning that your institution will be put on probation and will have to forfeit several athletic scholarships. It turns out that the student has one year of eligibility left even though he has only played a total of one-minute-eighteen-seconds in three years and is graduating early. You finally get to meet the basketball coach and athletic director. Forget about those season tickets!

▷ *April 8th*

You make one last round of calls to all students who have yet to turn you down. By this time they have become seasoned veterans of the recruiting wars and are playing hardball. In addition to increases in the stipends offered, they are asking for a range of concessions—first-year courses to be taken by audit, no qualifying exams, and a personal trainer. Okay—but no free memberships to the faculty club!

▷ *April 14th*

You haven't started your taxes yet, but that's the least of your worries. If all the students who have yet to turn you down say yes, you are batting 0.100. If you only include those who scored above 300 on the verbal GREs, that number drops off. You face your colleagues at a faculty meeting and put things in the most positive light—you have eliminated those who don't *really* want to work hard.

▷ *April 15th*

In many ways, it is entirely appropriate that decision day coincides with the IRS deadline. Letters and phone calls stream in with the final verdicts.

It is interesting to hear the reasons why certain students declined their offers. Some are more blunt than others. Things like the offending school colors, the local supermarket's produce section, or the motif in the departmental office are mentioned. There are even those "left-handed" acceptances: "My parents said I have to go there." "My girlfriend's rock group wants to be based there." "Great rollerblading trails."

But, the good news is that some accept because that's where they want to be! At least, that's what they say, and you don't pursue the matter further, for obvious reasons.

▷ *April 16th*

The recruiting season is finally over. You feel as if the weight of the world is now off your shoulders. Freedom at last! Back to teaching and research.

You begin to go through all the departmental mail that's been accumulating since last April. Darn, you forgot to file last year's final spring semester senior grades—no wonder the graduation rate was so low.

The department Head stops by to comment on the recruiting results—a job well done. You exchange small talk until you hear the phrase, ". . . now next year I want you to continue . . . ," at which time you decide to apply for a sabbatical as a crossing guard at the local elementary school.

No one said this would be more than a one-year sentence! ❐