

CITYWIDE ENGAGEMENT FOR STUDENT RECRUITMENT

At Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) – like other P-TECH 9-14 schools, student recruitment is a critical step of the planning process. While NECA is open admission, with no screening or testing requirements, it is of utmost importance that students understand the school’s IT focus and have an interest in completing this rigorous program. During its first year of recruitment, NECA had the added challenge of beginning recruitment far later than other schools in the city, and had to devise a comprehensive set of strategies to attract 100 students for its inaugural class.

School: Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) in Norwalk, Connecticut

Partners: Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College and IBM Corporation

Launch: September 2014

AAS Degrees: Mobile Programming and Software Engineering

Standout Fact: The first P-TECH 9-14 model school in Connecticut

THE CHALLENGE

When the partners of Norwalk Early College Academy (NECA) began student recruitment for Connecticut’s first P-TECH 9-14 school, they knew they were already very late in the process. In Norwalk, students and families plan ahead when identifying the right high school to attend. Applications to magnet and private schools in the city’s school district can close as early as March, with open houses starting in January.

By comparison, NECA’s recruitment season started in April – just after this new school was announced, but as other schools’ recruitment seasons were coming to an end, and many families had already made their decision for the fall. Even so, Governor Dannel Malloy’s high profile announcement of the NECA partnership between Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College, and IBM on April 4, 2014, helped spur recruitment, with a number of local papers bringing significant attention to the program. But the time constraints remained, with NECA set to open its doors in late August.

BRINGING INFORMATION TO FAMILIES ACROSS NORWALK

The NECA Steering Committee knew that it would have to act comprehensively and with great speed to recruit its first year of students. Admission to NECA for the 100 student seats would occur through an open lottery process, but given how late it was, the committee was not convinced that they would be able to recruit a full class of NECA students.

The Steering Committee knew that the best student recruitment plan would disseminate information about NECA across the entire Norwalk community, reaching out to families in all areas of the city. Rather than expecting families to come to Norwalk High School, the committee decided to hold six evening information sessions throughout Norwalk, including at the feeder middle schools, Norwalk Community College (NCC), City Hall, a church and a community center. Every session was attended by a representative from each partner, who spoke about the opportunity for students during formal presentations, with plenty of time devoted to answering questions from families.

Locations were carefully chosen and planned and scheduled in quick succession between late April and early May. For example, the church and community center brought information to families who lived far away from more central locations, such as City Hall. A translator was brought to the community center

session, because of its location in a largely Spanish-speaking neighborhood. The NCC location provided an exciting opportunity to show students and their families where their children would be taking college classes and earning their associate in applied science degrees. The evening sessions were augmented by daytime information sessions held by Norwalk High School Principal Reginald Roberts at feeder middle schools for prospective students. Applications were made available at each session, as well as online.

The NCC information session was the most well-attended. Karen Amaker, NECA School Director, believes this was because of the nature of location. "It may have had to do with parents thinking that it wasn't just talk about students having access to college classes and accessing the resources at NCC," says Amaker. "Being on the campus helped them to see their children as NCC students as well."

RECRUITMENT SESSIONS STRENGTHEN WITH EXPERIENCE

Because the official NECA launch and recruitment began late, the committee realized that it may not have had the time to fully think through certain aspects of the school that families were eager to know. For example, NECA is a school within a school, housed within Norwalk High School. Steering Committee members were not initially ready to answer questions about how students would be able to manage a longer class schedule and still participate in the larger Norwalk High School extracurricular activities, such as band, athletics, or theater. These early questions helped the Steering Committee focus on making quick decisions on this and other significant issues, so that they could clearly communicate to students and families the school's expectations and opportunities.

At the end of the recruitment window, NECA held a final information session in the Norwalk High School cafeteria. The partners were thrilled to see the cafeteria filled with an audience of more than 80 students and family members. The audience asked a broad array of questions from funding sustainability and statewide support, to specific programmatic elements such as mentoring and internships. It would have been difficult to answer families' questions thoroughly without having representatives from all partners present. More than 30 families submitted their decisions to enroll their children in NECA by the end of the evening, bringing the total student count to more than 80 a few days before the application deadline. In the end, more than 90 students enrolled in NECA.

NECA's recruitment challenges should lessen over time. NECA will compete for students at the same time as other Norwalk high schools, and now has a fully-formed program that it can showcase. Just one month into the 2014-2015 school year, planning is under way for recruitment for next year's class and will almost certainly include the voices of NECA students, sharing their experiences with a new crop of potential applicants.

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For more information about a Diverse Student Body in the P-TECH 9-14 model, please visit ptech.org