

8-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Niedermeier, Lynn E.. (2006). A Master Recruiter. *Echo*.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_wku_hist/16

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A Master Recruiter
by Lynn Niedermeier

Every fall, the number of students converging on campus attests to the success of Western Kentucky University's recruitment and retention programs. In the school's early years, Henry Hardin Cherry was also determined to secure a large and enthusiastic student body for the newly chartered Western Kentucky State Normal School. Fortunately, Western's first president possessed a natural talent for promotion to accompany his belief in education, and his devotion to student success laid the groundwork for such modern-day recruitment and retention programs as O-A-R and M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan.

As proprietor of the Southern Normal School, Western's predecessor, Cherry had already gained considerable experience in student recruitment. Targeting the young men and women of rural Kentucky and neighboring Southern states, he assembled extensive mailing lists with the help of former students. "You are a part of this organism," he reminded graduates, asking them to supply names and addresses and commit to procuring at least two new enrollees for the coming term.¹ Embarking on his own recruitment tours, Cherry interviewed prospects and collected more names. To these candidates and their communities, he then sent a flood of advertising circulars touting both the Southern Normal School and Bowling Green.

Cherry masterfully crafted his advertising to remove any doubt about the popularity and prestige of an institution that, in reality, was still a very modest enterprise. A favorite technique was to collect all of his students and equipment into a small space, then photograph "a corner of the typewriting room," giving the impression of an institution bursting at the seams with activity.² Offering a similar photograph of his telegraphy department, Cherry claimed that it was one of the world's largest. In his later advertising for the Western Kentucky State Normal School, he included panoramic pictures of the entire student body, herded onto the lawn in front of the Administration Building (now Van Meter Hall), as if to say to those not yet enrolled: "Surely all these people can't be wrong!"

Cherry's recruitment materials also addressed the concerns of unworldly young men and women who were apprehensive about higher education. To calm anxieties about travel, he encouraged new students from across the South to gather on an appointed day at the L&N railroad office in New Orleans, where two faculty members would escort them on the train to Bowling Green. Upon arrival, students could expect assistance in obtaining respectable boarding facilities and church membership. School-sponsored leisure activities—trips to Mammoth Cave, steamboat excursions on the Green and Barren Rivers, chestnut hunts and monthly socials with the faculty—gave parents confidence in the "moral safety" of their sons and daughters. In an age when outbreaks of smallpox and typhoid could still arouse much fear, Cherry emphasized the school's healthful location and its low student mortality rate. Lastly, he assured those of humble origins that they would find a friendly, egalitarian atmosphere. "Extravagance of all kinds is discouraged," he declared. Western students were "common people—the best that God ever made," and merit alone was the standard for advancement.³

Part of the challenge for Cherry's students grew from the fact that, in Western's early years, few of them—only five in 1907—had earned four-year high school diplomas.⁴ As public high schools multiplied, however, curious seniors began to visit the campus in greater numbers. Glimpsing another recruitment opportunity, on April 6, 1934, Cherry formally welcomed students from across Kentucky to Western's first High School Senior Day. More than 2,000 of them enjoyed a campus tour, luncheon, band concert and physical education demonstration, and an annual event was born.⁵

High School Senior Day quickly expanded to reflect the diversity of activities on the Hill. Choral groups joined the band in providing musical entertainment, which by 1939 included a rendition of the newly minted fight song, "Stand Up and Cheer." Physical education students offered folk dancing and tap routines, pyramid-building, tumbling and other stunts, and boxing, wrestling and basketball demonstrations. The ROTC and Pershing Rifles staged drills while members of the Western Players, the school's theatrical troupe, exhibited their dramatic talents. Open houses in all academic departments allowed students to match their interests to a program of study. On these event-packed days, a school publication declared, the campus "teemed with the enthusiasm of youth."⁶

High school seniors who arrived the next fall as freshmen found another program designed to ease their transition to life on the Hill. Begun in 1929, Freshman Week steered them through the preliminaries of registration, academic advisement and proper library use. Then as now, administrators promised that the headaches confronting the new student—closed classes, schedule changes and gaps in program requirements—would be minimized by such advance attendance. Of course, timely completion of paperwork was only the first step in the orientation process. Ongoing attempts to cultivate proper study habits, stress management, good relationships with peers and faculty, and familiarity with Western traditions evolved by fall 1970 into Freshman Assembly, a required one-hour course for students during their first semester.

Today, O-A-R (Orientation-Advisement-Registration), begun in 1975, M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan (Making Academic and Social Transitions Educationally Rewarding), introduced in 1993, the "Welcome to Western" festival and the new Gateway Community Program and University Experience Department help freshmen navigate the complex world of twenty-first-century higher education. These programs are only the latest incarnations of Henry Hardin Cherry's plan to attract and keep students, not only until graduation but beyond—for loyal alumni, he knew, were the best advertisements of all.

¹ "To Our Former Students," Circular, n.d., Southern Normal School Collection, Western Kentucky University Archives.

² James P. Cornette, "A History of the Western Kentucky State Teachers College," *Teachers College Heights*, v. 19, no. 1, [1939], 68.

³ *Southern Educator*, August 1906; *State Normal Bulletin*, November 1906; Southern Normal School Catalogue, 1905-06, Western Kentucky University Archives.

⁴ *Normal Heights*, June 1920, 3.

⁵ *Teachers College Heights*, July 1934, 20-21, 26.

⁶ *Teachers College Heights*, July 1937, 25.