

Interview with Margaret Dechant, Former Director of Admissions at CCSU and TAMU-CC (during transition period to becoming a four-year institution)

Rene

Hi, Margaret.

Margaret

Hi, Rene.

Margaret

Thank you so much for this opportunity to talk about one of my most favorite subjects, which is our first freshman class at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, thank you for taking the time out of your day.

Rene

I know you're a busy lady, but I wanted to pick your brain a little bit on your experience as the admissions director during the university's transition to becoming a four-year university. As you know, I'm specifically interested in the recruitment, admissions and enrollment of the first freshman class.

But I also want to know, you know, your journey and how you got to where you were as the admissions director around that time frame.

So can you share a little bit about your experience and how you got to that position?

Margaret

I'm happy to do that.

Thank you so much.

So I started my career at A&M-Corpus Christi in 1987 and so at that time we were an upper-level institution called Corpus Christi State University.

I worked my first job in the Office of Student Financial Aid where I was the coordinator of scholarships and student work study.

So as an upper level institution, we only had one recruiter for the university.

That recruiter was located in the Office of Admissions.

We were a very small operation and as the recruiter would go on the road, she would reach out to me and ask me if we had any information or materials that she could take with her concerning scholarships to the university.

So I would, I would provide her with that information and then one day I said "would you like for me to accompany you on your on your visits to the community colleges?"

Because as an upper level institution, we only recruited at community colleges and maybe other types of businesses or organizations that would invite us, so she said "yes".

She was very receptive to my offer.

So as she would coordinate her recruitment schedule to the to the local Community College, Del Mar College and the area surrounding area community colleges, she would invite me to attend with her.

So I did and it was a very successful partnership and one that I think actually started the future partnership that is in place today where I think of, I believe at least when I was Director of Admissions, that we would take a financial aid person with us at when we could.

So they they could speak about financial aid and scholarships.

So basically that's what I did.

So I I partnered with them and I spoke about financial aid, how to apply for it, and of course my focus was providing information on scholarships.

So that partnership and that my work in financial aid, which I enjoyed thoroughly.

It lasted for approximately a year when the recruiter that I was partnering with decided to move to another institution.

And when that happened our supervisor over the entire financial aid division and admissions division approached me, Dr. Tito Guerrero, and he asked me if I'd be interested in in being the taking the recruiting position.

So I, I at first I was hesitant because I loved my work in financial aid and I, I actually have a Master's in Business Administration and I felt it was you know I, I was utilizing some of my skills as I had to work with spreadsheets and data.

And so I ended up thinking about it and he said I could still continue you know working you know doing some work with financial aid and scholarships.

So yes, I did take that admissions recruiter job and that is what catapulted me into eventually becoming and being promoted by Dr Tito Guerrero to the Director of Admissions.

So by this time it's already 1993 and in 1993 we were we had a name change to Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and the announcement came out after a huge community effort here in Corpus Christi to, to move us to a four year university.

The announcement was made that we were also going to be deemed a four-year university.

We would become a four year university in 1994 that we were going to be allowed as per the Texas State legislature to enroll 400 freshman students.

They asked us to cap the first freshman class in 1994 at 400 students asking us to please do that so that we wouldn't have a dramatic effect on the enrollment at our local Community College and at the university down the road from us.

So we, as the Director of Admissions, and knowing that this was a mandated by the Texas Legislature and us not having the best of technology in the past as our student information system was a, a home grown student information system.

But but let me just say here that after working with the the products, the student information products later on in life, I want to go back and restate what I mean.

Not having the best technology because that home grown student information system was the best one that I definitely have ever worked in.

But what I mean not having the best technology is that we didn't have additional reports.

We weren't, we weren't, you know, we had to work on that because now we were a four-year university.

We were very accustomed to just having the more simple reporting that as an upper level institution.

So no, the best home grown, the home grown student information system we had is by far the best.

It was so incredibly easy to navigate.

So once we realized that we needed this important data, our IT team, which by the way was located in the same building where admissions was, allowed us to coordinate a wonderful effort and allowed us to create reports which were part of the student information system, much like today.

But it was so easy to navigate, and you could change up the report yourself.

You could you know add attributes, delete attributes, add whatever other information that you might like.

So as the director of admissions that's that's what I did and that's, that that really helped tremendously on us trying to keep track of of enrolling 400 students for our first freshman class.

So the recruitment effort was obviously different.

Of course we, we did go to Del Mar College and all of our Community College recruiting and, and by this time we have one other recruiter.

So I'm the Director of admissions and now I have one recruiter and so now we're going to build upon the, upon that and hire additional recruiting staff.

But at the very beginning it was there was just a handful of us in the office of admissions working very closely as a team because the applications that would come in were hard copy applications that had to be entered manually.

The, the high school transcripts that are now starting to come in.

They're also coming in you know by, by mail, by regular US mail and not electronically at it, as, as they are today.

So we literally assigned them a number much like we have today, but the number we assigned was as a matter of fact those those ledgers are now housed in our university library.

But you will see all over those ledgers, the handful of staff and myself that when an application would come in, we would assign the next number to that particular application.

So when we did that manually, so but then but the work was a team effort, everybody was thrilled across the Corpus Christi community and on campus.

So we were going to make this happen and so we recruited at the high schools.

All of the local high schools embraced us and after contacting the principals and the lead counselors, they just opened their doors.

They wanted us to come in.

They wanted us to to have application day programs at their school and even application nights.

And of course, coupled with the financial aid filling out of the financial aid application, the FAFSA and then any scholarship applications as well.

And then we also encourage them to, because we also at that time instituted A holistic review for those students who didn't meet our regular admission requirements.

We encouraged them to send us actually at the time we would say send us a resume as well.

So nowadays, we don't say that we have them completed a different section on Apply Texas that that covers all of that type of extracurricular activities, honors, awards, extenuating circumstances.

So we were actually asking our applicants to provide that so that we could run those applications for students who didn't meet our regular admission requirements through the holistic process.

That process was mimicked after the process at Texas A&M College Station, we contacted their admissions office and they met with us.

They even came down to campus and together we created our holistic review which we used to call alternative admission to the university and then later alternative admission by committee.

So all of that work was getting done during that time period so that we could reach as many students as possible focusing on our own backyard obviously, as a Hispanic serving institution, because the, the Texas State legislature also indicated in the legislation that we were to recruit, enroll and retain those students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education.

And I'm pretty sure that's almost a direct quote.

I lived by that my entire career in enrollment management and I still that's, that's what I believe in today.

So it's not hard for me to quote the legislation that's been near and dear to my heart.

So that had that that ensued.

We again, we recruited at the local and area high schools, venturing out into further beyond Corpus Christi, and as an institution we decided to go as far as 150 mile radius, I'm sorry 150 miles from the university in every direction from Corpus Christi, because we felt that 150 miles was a doable travel distance for our first freshman class.

So anything beyond that we took became as we were already a strong partner with the Texas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers organization.

So we utilize the, TACRAO as it's called, TACRAO schedule to recruit as even further but beyond the 150 miles that I just spoke about.

So we did the best that we could with the limited amount of staff that we had to follow the TACRAO schedule very strategically looking at it not to go too far.

And so that we could utilize our staff in the most efficient manner and, and to recruit those students again that we were per the legislation asked to you know to to be an institution of choice for.

So our work, we were extremely busy. It was a wonderful team effort.

We also held I and I'm trying to remember honestly some type of a campus open house, I believe at least one to bring students to campus.

The one thing that we did also institute was inviting the local and area counselors, high school counselors to campus for what we used to call at the time counselor update and then later on as the years go, you know past 1994.

Then of course we venture out to those to our different target areas in the future and we hold counselor updates in those areas.

Rene

So it looks as if you were like anticipating the questions I was going to ask you.

Rene

OK, Can you hear me?

Margaret

Yeah.

Rene

So just just real quick, can we, can we go back just a little bit?

And I know that the Wi-Fi is a little, it's breaking up a little bit.

But before we changed our name and before we brought in the first freshman class, can you remember the creation and implementation of the marketing material that we would send out to people almost as if you know like the search pieces like how did how did that process work?

Margaret

OK, so are you talking prior to or or or 419 to to recruit students for our first freshman class or are you talking when we were Corpus Christi State University.

Rene

Yes.

To recruit the first freshman class.

Margaret

OK.

At the time, It was a transition period.

Right.

Rene

So it's like you can't it's like you. Yeah you didn't put A&M-Corpus on the brochures but you were still kind of recruiting for that four year school.

Margaret

Yes, we were.

So the beauty of being a small institution at the time was that every one of these important offices were located in the Student Service Center, which we affectionately refer to as the Round Building.

So our marketing department for the university was located in the Student Service Center or the round Building.

So the Office of Admissions was central and then next to at the registrar and next to the registrar's office was our marketing department.

And then financial aid scholarships were in the building business office Upstairs.

We had academic advising, orientation, Dean of students, the assistant to the President and the president was located in the in the same building as well as our Veteran's office.

So we were all gathered in the same building, which was made it very easy to answer your question.

We had the accessibility for all of us was, you know was king because we could just gather together in in a small little area in that building and together with our marketing department come up with what we needed to come up with in order to recruit students.

So they put together some type of a brochure for us as a marketing piece because by this time we also have developed our admission requirements and those requirements.

Again, we were very careful about that.

Of course we looked at our aspiration colleges or universities that we aspired to someday, someday be like.

But we also knew who we were at the time and and that we needed to look at our our, you know, or the sister institution down the road as well as the the schools in San Antonio.

And of course looking at College Station, we always went to A&M College Station.

We even though you know we knew their admission requirements were different and we always looked at A&M-College Station, University of Texas-Austin, even though their theirs were higher, their admission standards were higher.

But then we took a hard look at UTSA, Texas State. At the time it was, I think it was even San Marcos State University.

We also looked at other schools in San Antonio so that we can so that so that we could mimic and and be competitive.

We looked at at the time at University of Texas Pan American now called UT Pan Am or wait at the time it was Pan American University I believe anyway now UT Pan, UT Pan Am.

So we looked at the schools in the valley and any institutions of higher Ed in the valley.

And so after doing a thorough review of that the administration, we presented to the administration what we thought would be very competitive admission requirements.

1Let me state at this time that the Texas State legislature said that we would be declared a four year, four year university and that we would have competitive admission standards and and as well as the other information that I shared with you.

But yes, we were not to be an open door school.

We were to have admission standards, competitive admission standards.

So that's why we, you know we did a lot of work, a lot of research and we came up with with our admission requirements which was A at the time a combination of high school class rank and test score.

So the higher your class rank, the lower your test score could be because there there we had a scale and we can find that in our in our in our catalog for that year that came out.

So when we came up with that information, we actually put it on a on a brochure.

So, so in any case, yes, the marketing materials and So what we did was we OK.

So at that time we utilized any pictures in pictures from from people that you know that we had on campus or staff to come up with pictures to put on brochures.

But, but quickly after that, you know, after becoming a four year university, I think we did some pretty unique things.

And one of the things that comes to mind right now is that once we started to bring in students from all across the state of Texas, whenever we wanted to provide what they call information cards, a request for information cards.

When we developed those cards, what we did was we pulled in students from different areas, took photos of them and we put them on a poster and on.

And then we would attach our information cards to that poster with the photos of students from that particular high school.

So what we did is you know if we had king sorry students from Carroll High School we took we would gather these.

You know the the students from Carroll High School took a photo of them made a a a poster.

I don't know what size the ones I have here in my office are but we made a poster with their with their picture on there and put something on there like wish you were here or please come join us.

And so we did it. We did the photos of of the students from that were newly that were freshmen.

So that when other kids at that high school would see the photo, they would say, oh look, there's John. You know, wow, he's he goes to A&M-Corpus Christi.

And then maybe that would kick them to fill out one of our information cards. I just remembered that as an aside here as a recruitment effort shortly after becoming a four year university.

So yeah, that took that. That took an enormous amount of work.

It would took a lot of work to locate the students, get their approval to take the photos and then then to get those posters out. And then we did that you know for schools in the valley too and then the surrounding area around here, all of our local and surrounding area.

And then as we got, as our recruitment efforts started to expand, we moved on to do different recruiting things.

Rene

Just a couple of more questions.

You we've spoken before and you said that I think you said that one of your most proudest moments was writing the catalog for admission requirements. Can you explain why that that was one of your most proud moments?

Margaret

Oh gosh.

Well, by that, by that time I've invested an enormous amount of, or at least let's see 8, 7, 6...

So by that time I'm going on 6-7 years here at the university and I've become, I've become highly invested, highly invested in this university.

It was my university 1st and almost I am, I mean, I know you're recording this, but my my family was, you know, like right there first.

But my university, my allegiance, my devotion to CCSU and A&M-Corpus Christi was just number one on my list.

So it was near and dear to my heart because first of all I was honored to be the director of admissions to to have that honor of of you know transitioning to a four year university and being the director of admissions to to have the honor to usher in the first freshman class.

It was just a an honor for me to be a part of writing the, the, the, OR or developing the admission requirements at the time with with of course a team of people, other people, including my boss and then.

But to also be given the opportunity to write the catalog verbiage concerning the office of admissions, what we were about, what our mission was and our vision and also to write up the details of what the process was for regular admission as well as alternative admission was just that.

That to me will always be one of the highlights of of my my career here.

And then to have the opportunity to usher in the first freshman class.

And by the way, we hit the 400 number, we it was 404 students.

And that was in itself a miracle because we did have an enormous amount of applications and it was, it was a challenge for us to determine how many apps we needed to bring in and actually admit, you know, it's not just about bringing in the apps, it's also admitting those.

But how many do we have to admit in order to secure a 400 number enrollment?

That in itself was was a challenge.

We weren't able to determine based on not historical data because we did not have any, but we were able to determine that really looking at how you know some of the the work that other institutions have done.

So we did the best that we could and we hit, we nailed it. And so yes, that was a highlight of my career and I can't say enough about the university being my family.

And so yeah, so that that's definitely will always, I will always remember that I had that opportunity and and how how much it meant to me.

Rene

And then just last question, is there anything that you think that I should take away from your experiences or the events that happened during that time as we brought in the first freshman class that kind of still make impacts today as in like if it didn't happen while you were there, you know we wouldn't be where we are today.

Margaret

So some of the takeaways Rene and you know, I just since the day you were started your educational career here at the university you know how, I've I have, what I think of you.

Rene

I of the, you know, don't choke up.

Margaret

So some let's see.

OK so some takeaways.

You know, really what matters is the student.

We all know that.

That's why we have jobs, because of our students.

So I think it's important to focus on the student and to so and to recognize who we are as an institution.

We are a Hispanic-serving institution and we should embrace that as often as we can and focusing on providing the best customer service to our students. That is center to everything, providing services above and beyond.

We get exhausted after a while answering questions that you know to us are just like so simple because we do that work every day and for people who are applying students and their parents and or their their extended families who are applying.

They don't have that benefit That we have of knowing the ins and outs of of applying for admission, completing a FAFSA, navigating where to get information on scholarships, navigating to learn more about what student services we have.

Because some, because our students may you know in the admission process, need to know about student services because they may need some additional assistance in in either disability services or some of the other tutoring services that we offer.

Our students are coming from all different walks of life.

They may not realize that if they are coming out of the foster care system, what benefits they have.

They may not realize that they are actually the dependent of a veteran.

And so there are some benefits there that they need to know about.

So and it goes on and on and on.

I could go on about you know and and then there's that really important piece about what do you want to be when you grow up.

A lot of them don't know today, but let's expose them ahead of time to some career options, some, some career opportunities, you know and and not every student that goes to college has access to this type of information.

So accessibility is another key.

Customer service as I mentioned being customer service oriented and then providing access, accessibility to every single student not just the ones that that are fortunate enough to have been born into a situation where every there they have access to everything.

But there's the we know, we know that the a lot of the population that we serve does not, they do not have that benefit.

So again customer service, providing accessibility to the students, never forgetting who we are serving.

Those are three, two, those are three takeaways that that I would definitely say that moving forward in any recruitment type of programming to keep that in mind and then to go to the student.

So, so go to where they're at, don't think that they're going to come to us.

You know we need to go to them and we need to let them know who we are go to them and and remind them about how they will be a great fit with our university.

So they students have to really feel comfortable and feel like like they belong, you know and for the past couple of years, I think maybe two or three years now I belong is actually the theme of our first year convocation.

So you know I really have been invested in that particular program on campus and and the theme "I Belong" is is is one that's very, very important.

So you know we have to be sincere about it when we say that you know that you belong but and show them how, how they do belong.

So I think that's all important.

I think it's also important that we as an institution when we're out recruiting that we always emphasize that we have a excellent or very, you know, outstanding academic reputation.

That's important.

That's important to families too.

Speaking of families, include the family in your in in the recruitment of your student as much as you possibly can.

It doesn't matter that we think, oh they need to let go type thing.

We used to have a session...I don't know if we still do an orientation called "Let go... letting it go," but but The thing is is families for the students that we are serving is number one families is a major part of the admission decision for our for our students.

So I think family matters 100%.

So and we're becoming more active in that area as we have a family weekend now for the third year in the road, it'll be fourth number four this coming October.

And then I think the the Office of Student Engagement and Success is working to bring more of a a family touch to our university.

But as as recruiters, you know, we need to emphasize family.

Invite them to everything.

Include them in everything.

Survey them.

Ask them what they what their needs are, You know, what they would like to see for their student.

Is there anything else you would like for me to add at this time?

Rene

I can't think of anything, but no, I'm definitely going to take all of that from the interview.

But one thing you know that we know is that admissions is the front door to the university.

And just listening to you speak one thing I think that we need to bring as recruiters and admissions officers, is passion.

And so I have been very fortunate, fortunate to look up to you as a mentor.

Oh, now I'm gonna get choked up.

And I think that being able to look up to you and Leticia and Oscar and Linda and everybody that came before, before me, I feel that's where I, I learned to become passionate about what we do to serve our community.

And so thank you for that.

Margaret

You're welcome, Renee.

And you know, you bring up a good point.

You have it.

It can't just be a job.

You have to be passionate about it.

You have to really want to serve students.

You have to really want to be a servant leader and not you know just the leader part, but be the servant leader to all of our students that we are attempt you know that we try to recruit to this to our great university because we do have a great university.

We have a lot to offer and we need to remember that we're a family and we just need to let that show and shine when we're out there recruiting students.

Rene

Well, thank you very much for your time.

Margaret

You're so welcome.

And you're, you are an amazing young man and I love you dearly.

And I know that I know you personally to be a wonderful human being.

And I know as a professional that you are going to bust the ceiling on on education and serving students.

And I look forward to to seeing that happen.

So as you as you are doing already.

So I feel very fortunate to have you in my life 100%.