Recruiting Tips for a New Site: A Year-One Story

BY LIZ STEPHENS

When NWP Executive Director Richard Sterling called to congratulate me early in March 1998, I was ecstatic. Our proposal was accepted! For several minutes I floated jubilantly around the office because I knew there truly would be a Central Texas Writing Project. I felt fortunate, the winner of a coveted prize. Then I came face to face with the daunting realization that there truly would be a Central Texas Writing Project. A melange of emotions—fear, jubilation, anxiety, excitement—set in. Where do I start? How do I start? I suppose this is the mix of emotions that normally surrounds the initiation of any project that is highly desired and that demands immediate attention and direction.

I read my proposal carefully and immediately created a to-do list. I thought the best way to introduce the CTWP to the community was to host a social event, so I planned a breakfast to which I invited the superintendents and language arts coordinators of more than 25 area school districts. The schools that we serve are located in and around two metropolitan areas, San Antonio and Austin, in the central region of Texas. Our university is in San Marcos, midpoint on the highway connecting the two cities.

The invitations to the breakfast were attractive and expensive. Fortunately, I had included an RSVP. That’s how I knew that only two people on the invitation list could come and that the party needed to be cancelled. Strike one. I should have known from past experience that personal communication is the key to success. The CTWP would be a new kid in the neighborhood and needed to be introduced in person if I expected anyone to come to a party marking its debut. I revised my to-do list. Item number one now said, “GO to school district leaders, university professors, school-related organizations.”

Community
I began by cutting out the center part of a Texas road map. Using a highlighter I marked dots on the communities where school district offices are located. I called 11 offices and succeeded in making nine appointments with key district officers within a two-day period.

At each meeting, I presented the CTWP eagerly, providing a folder containing NWP brochures and materials, a brochure I had created for the CTWP summer institute and application forms. I asked many questions about the district, its teachers, and its programs, and I made sure that

I left with my new acquaintance’s business card. Before driving away, I wrote notes about my meeting.

The nine meetings were effective; some were fruitful. More than half the districts responded with names of teachers they recommended for participation in the first CTWP summer institute. It was the lead I needed to start recruiting.

University
Our university’s College of Education is the state’s largest teacher preparation institution. It also is a professional development school that has maintained a university-school collaborative for several years with 15 area school districts. Groups of students and their professors meet for class at 20 public schools—elementary, middle and high schools. I met with several field-based professors and sent a “CTWP birth announcement” to all professors on the faculty. The field-based professors know the faculty at their host schools and were helpful in suggesting names of teacher-candidates.

The professors also teach graduate-level classes and provided names of students whom they thought would benefit from the summer experience. These were particularly good leads because these teachers were already enrolled in our graduate program and could receive six hours of course credit, tuition paid through the CTWP.

Organizations
Speaking to organizations was also on the list. The director of our professional development school, who was invaluable in my quest for candidates, arranged to have me speak to the Center for Educational Partnerships, a group of area school district officers, teacher educators and civic leaders. Again, I prepared a promotional package and I used PowerPoint slides during my 20-minute presentation. This group provided many leads.

Summer Institute One
Fifteen teachers applied, and 13 incredibly talented teachers attended the first CTWP summer institute. Although 15 is a small number, I was grateful. I wondered how few I would have had if I had not knocked on doors and personally introduced our project. I kept in touch with my contacts in Year Two, and will do so again as we approach Year Three. Of course, having 28 teacher consultants now tremendously helps recruiting efforts.

Four Summer Institute Tips
Introducing and promoting your new site is key to a successful first year. Here’s a suggested to-do list:

1. Print brochures, applications, and prepare a promotional package.

2. Get the word out personally. Personal communication is the key to success.

3. Tap existing networks (university faculty, education organizations, etc.).

4. Always have applications available at your site office.