

Pandemic enhances recruiting for Duke Divinity

By *TODD MABERRY*

The global pandemic is causing significant disruption to most aspects of admissions work, and it has directly affected Duke Divinity School's recruiting efforts.

Our recruiting strategies before the pandemic centered on enticing prospective students to visit our beautiful campus and traveling all over the country to connect with future students and those who influence them. When the lockdown began in March 2020, this strategy instantly disintegrated and we had to pivot quickly.

Several months into operating in this new landscape, we are seeing great results and it is already obvious that new and unexpected recruiting efforts will live in our long-term strategy well beyond the end of the pandemic. To follow are the top three ways the pandemic has enhanced our recruiting.

1 *Specialized webinars*

Prior to the pandemic, we hosted campus visits almost weekly. We immediately pivoted to offering virtual visits through Zoom. This worked well, and we saw significant attendance growth specifically in specialized webinars. It became much easier to secure key faculty members and alumni to engage virtually for an hour or so in an area of their expertise. We were able to target specific subsections of our student populations such as women, specific degree programs, veterans, those interested in our Office of Black Church Studies, etc. We also did a series where we put two faculty members in dialogue with one



photo courtesy of Eliza Stewart, current Duke Divinity student

another, and we invited prospective students to participate in the conversation. After the pandemic, we will certainly continue offering these targeted webinars.

2 *Virtual joint recruiting*

For the past decade, we collaborated with our peer schools on joint recruiting events. We would travel to places like New York, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, and Nashville to host recruiting fairs. The attendance and effort that each host exerted varied greatly, and even the best events had no more than 50 prospective students and all came with significant costs. In the pandemic, this group rebranded itself as the Association of Academic Divinity Schools and hosted a monthly Zoom webinar in the early evening. Those events drew 75 to 200 prospective students and became some of the most vibrant recruiting in my decade of higher ed experience. We have already smashed our own yearly records for the number of prospective students we engaged and the recruiting year is now only half over!

3 *Launching a podcast*

Unable to travel, we still wanted to find a way to share stories and insights about our community. Our admissions team pulled together to launch a podcast called the Duke Divcast that provided insights and stories from faculty, alumni, and current students. It required our team to learn new roles such as podcast host, producer, and sound designer. We had a lot of fun learning these new skills and the podcast now has thousands of downloads.

While we are ready for the pandemic to end so we can resume welcoming students to campus and making

connections through travel, we are already grateful for these three ways the pandemic has forced us to enhance our recruiting efforts in ways that will last. Last year, we welcomed the largest incoming class in the history of school, and we are cautiously optimistic about the next recruiting class. We have little doubt that the pandemic will create long-term challenges to enrollment, but enhanced recruiting efforts will help in facing those challenges.

How has the pandemic enhanced your recruiting efforts? I would love to hear your insights. Email them to me at tmaberry@div.duke.edu



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