Viewing MIT's image: Michael Behnke

By Matthew Checchi

Interview

Michael C. Behnke is the MIT director of admissions. Behnke served as dean of undergraduate admissions at Tufts University for nine years before coming to MIT. Behnke received an AB degree in American Studies from Amherst College in 1965 and an MA in American Civilization in 1970 from the University of Pennsylvania. He worked in an Inner City Tutorial program and spent two years in the Peace Corps in the time between his two degrees. Behnke was associate director of admissions at Amherst for 15 years. He was Dean of Freshmen, a position he created, for one of those years.

Q: In your nine years as dean of undergraduate admissions at Tufts, what problems did you confront? What changes did you implement?

A: The main problem Tufts had was name recognition among the student body. A lot of people didn't know what Tufts was, and that's not a new discovery. People thought that it's a university. A lot of people continue. The other thing we did was revamp all of our admissions office. The admissions office did not do very much travelling and they didn't do much to encourage people to visit the campus. Tufts had a very poor reputation. It's not terrible easy to find, and also it's in a very unusual, very nice location. And most people thought that it's either in the middle of the city, or that Medford, Massachusetts would be outside of Worcester, for all they knew. It was very important to get people onto the campus, and see what an unusual location it had, so we did a lot to encourage people to visit the campus and by the time I left, we estimated we had 15 to 20 thousand people visiting the campus each year. We also increased our travel a tremendous amount. Tufts had not really travelled to say, California at all before I came but we pulled a number of applications. We also increased numbers and so we really increased our visibility outside of New England which has always been a traditional strength for Tufts.

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We also tried to develop a stronger image for the place and around just a couple of themes. One was the location, the other was the fact that it's a university. A lot of people thought of it as more of a college, but it has a lot of the advantages of a university. It is in fact a university, although smaller. We emphasized that, and we emphasize the structure, the fact that it's still very small, though we're a university.

We took over, we were not competing very well for minority students, so we increased quite a bit the recruiting for minorities in East Coast. For a few years we were very successful, but by the time I left the numbers had gone down quite a bit so that success didn't continue. The other thing is that we were evangilizing all of our publications. Our publications were very poor. We did what was there and added a lot of publications. I think the collection of publications at Tufts now is very good and we're making progress.

Another thing that's very important is the increasing number of volunteer recruiters that are involved in the effort. For example, we have an enormous network of educational counselors who do a lot of interviewing and a lot of recruiting. Tufts had very little of that. They generally did not have local alumni clubs and I think that the concept of having local volunteer network is very important.

We worked a lot to develop that student alumni volunteer network.

And we computerized the whole operation. In general, it worked out the whole flow of information in the office, which was lucky because applications went from about six thousand to around four thousand in a couple of years, and if we hadn't made the changes it would have overwhelmed us.

Q: How would you relate your experience at Tufts with what you plan to do at MIT?

A: MIT has an image problem too. At Tufts, it was more of a lack of an image. MIT has a very strong reputation and it has immediate recognition on the part of most people who know about education, but it doesn't have a complete image. There's a lot about MIT people don't know about, and the image of MIT is so strong — it makes it difficult for people to appreciate the breadth of what's available here.

It's a different kind of image problem but it's still an image problem. It's going to be a very important thing as we try to broaden our image and improve an image and do outreach.

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Q: What specific goals do you have for MIT admissions?

A: The most immediate goal is to do something about minority admissions. We're not going to have transfer admissions. MIT right now does attract a fairly good group of students but the number of minorities or appears to be frightening off many of them, and so the number of minority students is dropping. We're trying to stop that and to improve the body's giving attention to that.

I just got a notice from a group of small New England colleges UK eats with and every year they identify one major agenda item. It's already been identified as minority recruiting and admissions. We're not going to have a good year this year, apparently, in terms of representation of minority students. That has got to be one of the first things we look at. In fact, some actions have already been taken. We just hired an additional person to devote his attention to minority student recruitment. So now we have two members of the staff who are going to work out that fact. Both of them are on the road right now. We've also added spring travel to try to increase our visibility out there. Hopefully, that will have an effect. We're just going to have to look at it as a couple of different ways during the coming year.

I believe the class last year had up to 28 percent which is a very high representation compared to the other schools that are primarily engineering, but the number of women expressing an interest in engineering is dropping nationally as well. We've got a challenge to maintain that percentage where it is. These are two immediate problems.

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Then there's the imbalance problem. The recent declaration of majors, going from the declaration of the freshman for women to give us some sense of catch to our breath. The number of women declaring about Course VI still being a drooping bit, but the imbalance is certainly still there and we have to give that a lot of thought, the whole institute as well as the admissions office. I think an ongoing concern is simply to maintain our position and hopefully emerge with it our traditional market. The central focus of MIT certainly is on engineering and technology, and we are attracting strong students in those areas right now. But we do have some real demographic problems heading our way. The steep downturn of the number of high school seniors isn't just limited to girls. That's really in the next five years.

There's increasing competition for the top students. A lot of other schools are upgrading their offerings in engineering and science, and we are more schools offering merit scholarships while we are offering financial incentives. We're going to have to monitor very carefully how that affects our student body and be ready to respond because we are losing a question we want to maintain our prominence in engineering position and maximize it.

Aside from the Course VI imbalance, I think the real concern we're having is that with a whole. MIT has many strengths and underutilized departments and a real goal is to broaden the choice of majors in general. It's part of developing a broader image of MIT in the sense that we are more aware. We want to look at transfer admissions. MIT does attract a fairly healthy number of transfer students, but we want to see if the numbers can be increased. The transfer students might bring us some of the breadth we are looking for. We have to look very seriously during the next couple of years and continue to look very seriously at issues of financial aid; not only how to respond to the financial incentives that other schools may be offering but in a number of ways of other kinds of financial aid, but the whole issue of differential packaging, related to our extremely high self-help expectation.

Q: What is your opinion of need-blind admissions?

A: I think it is very important to maintain need-blind admissions. The most important reason is that it's a quality issue. Ability is not restricted to those who can pay. The admissions process is a long and difficult process. We need to get the best students, and need-blind admissions, the decision, the more you are going to affect the quality of the incoming students. Aside from that, I think it has a policy issue that all institutions deal with. Beyond that, I think MIT has a responsibility to be in a leadership position that sends signals off to kids that higher education like this is still available regardless of financial circumstance. And it is this is still available regardless of financial circumstance.

Q: Do you have any plans stepped out for as we as a member of your staff?

A: First of all is to add an additional minority recruiter and to add some spring travel in order to get out and look at financial incentives and how our high cost financial aid packaging is preventing some minority students from enrolling. We're studying that right now, and we will continue to study the issue if we think that that, I think a lot of the efforts that we're going to take are to be more travel. Our visibility is the problem.

Everybody on the staff also has to be a part of that. We have to go out there and talk to people on the staff. We have responsibility for that; it's something everybody has to work at. It's going to be a priority for us in the next year. But it's hard to see what we have to do to help people to be attacked by a lot of different institutions in the same way. We are going to look at a whole right now and not at individual institutions.

The signals that have been sent out to minority students is that they should aspire to higher education and certainly the policy of this administration is to have people who are not wealthy go to public schools and community colleges. That is the signal being sent out, and it's very hard for one or two or three institutions to have any effect on the face of the constant publicity given to Reagan proposals to cut financial aid and to generally roll back the gains of the sixties and early seventies. This one group of colleges is going to address this issue at their spring meeting. I think it's good to become a top agenda item at most of our meetings of colleges to figure out some sort of concerted way to get messages to our minority students. There are still funds available and institutions that are interested in having them enroll. They're simply not applying.

Q: And as far as student groups go?

A: Hopefully we'll be able to hold our own. Our experience, I believe, has been that the women students are responding well to our efforts. They seem to be more responsive to that than the fact that we're here. We still have to listen to girls and be ready to respond because we want to maintain our position in engineering position and maximize it.

One other thing we're going to look at incidentally, is the selection process itself. The scholastic index, which is one part of the selection process has been examined in a number of years. It's just time that the whole process is looked at again.

We also hopefully will give some thought to improving the campus visit. I don't know whether it is necessary improve the campus visit but the campus visit is a crucial thing. And we want to make sure that we do a lot more research to help us take correct action.

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