

Ethics in Admissions

by

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So, just how much money will it cost for you to admit my son? Extreme example, or a line that every admissions professional has heard at least once in their careers?

Ethics and doing the right thing enter into our lives everyday. How we respond to these ethical dilemmas and choices determines what type of individuals we are. Our actions and responses in turn project to that individual, our institution's ethics or belief system.

The college admissions office is the entry point for all undergraduate students. The beliefs and ethics demonstrated by the front-line individuals in admissions sets the tone for the institution in the minds of our future students and their parents.

Where is college admissions along the ethical continuum? The answer is wide spread. We, as professionals, have an obligation to develop and uphold a code of ethics as a profession. The Statement of Principles of Good Practice for members of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) is just such a document. This ethical document was first created along with NACAC in 1937. This document is revisited yearly and revised as necessary. All members of NACAC are expected to inform anyone who recruits for the university to be aware of and uphold these very principles. The document is excellent and well conceived, but is it enough?

This paper will touch upon many of the current ethical challenges in higher education and will focus on three specific issues now facing admissions offices. The first will be the challenge to make the class at any cost. The second will be the marketing of college campuses to prospective students and the third will be the training of the professionals in the field of admissions. All three ethical issues will be analyzed in four separate stages. I will identify the issue as it stands today, develop the

implications for the future if it is continued, propose some alternative methods or responses and recommend a potential solution after weighing the options as I see them.

### Making the Class at All Costs

It is not unusual for an admissions director or an entire office to lose their jobs when enrollment targets are not met. This has traditionally been the policy at many private higher education institutions for years and is a trend that is becoming more common on the public campuses as well. The message that this sends is a very simple one. Your job is to make the class and to do it at all costs.

This is a particular challenge for open admissions institutions with little or no entry barriers. It can very easily become an ethical challenge for institutions that have traditionally denied students. The admissions director who is looking to make a class often looks at the students directly below the previous line of denial. This will allow them to make their class and to keep the institution at its targeted enrollment. This will also make more students happy about being accepted.

The institution may increase the amount of scholarships it awards to top students in order to increase their likelihood of enrolling. Institutions also look to foreign students or out of state students to make up the shortfall they are seeing in traditional recruitment markets. It is becoming even more common for an institution to think of its students in terms of the numbers of dollars each of them represents. In doing so this balances out shortfalls in one area with increases in other areas. These are all common practices in universities across our country and it might be difficult to understand where the questions of ethicality come in.

The lowering of standards can have significant implications for an institution and higher education in general. The United States system is made up of many types and sizes of institutions and it possesses a definite tier structure. Lowering standards at a higher tier institution has impacts on the level directly below it and in turn will have a trickle-down effect all the way to the easy entry institution. Students who would have traditionally entered on the lower tier will now have access to a higher tier institution. This is fine, if that institution has put into place programs and support systems for this new student. Faculty are expecting the same quality of student they have had in the past and will very likely expect the same type of work from these new students. This type of reaction to making the class may be setting up students to fail and often this is not taken into consideration when standards are lowered.

Increasing the amount of scholarships to the top academic students can increase a profile of the accepted class and cancel out the lower scores of other students you accepted. This allows students who have performed well a reward for their hard work. However, the downside to this type of scholarship offer may revolve around the issues of where the money comes from and where it will come from in the future. If an institution is using money from the usual pool of financial aid and is taking these funds away from financially disadvantaged students, it can very quickly change the dynamic of an institution. The second challenge is where this money will come from in the future. Once you start down the road of scholarship offerings you can never return. You may have a one-year gain in enrollment, but you will find your competition will quickly counter your offers and you will simply be off to the races in the scholarship game. This

is supported by the recent announcement of academic scholarships at many of the Ivy League Schools.

Foreign students and out of state students most certainly add to the diversity of an institution. Not to mention, they pay more at most public schools because of out of state tuition. They also may make up for temporary shortfalls in enrollment. The concern would be that in the future they might take spaces of in-state students who traditionally attend your institution. Increasing numbers at the undergraduate level to balance out losses at the graduate level or increasing admissions to one department in order to make up for losses in another department may help balance the books. It may also change the dynamics and focus of the university. You must make sure that those areas that are receiving the increased number of students will be able to accommodate them and not lower the quality of education for all students.

There are of course no easy answers to the numbers game in higher education. The institution needs to understand the short-run effect as well as the long-run impact of making the class at all costs. All solutions should be addressed in the context of the mission and goals of the institution. Failure to do this sets an institution on a course that it might not be able to return from. An institution may consider cutting back on students and sticking to its core beliefs and values. Most institutions that have set this as an agenda have come out on the other side leaner, but often quite stronger and more appealing to prospective students.

It is difficult to recommend a solution to making the class at all costs. If I were to propose one, it would need to be one that has a set plan and is not just attaining the goals for one or two years and then reevaluating. An institution needs to be able to

define its path over the next year as well as the next twenty years. If they decide to implement any of the above-mentioned measures to make up for the shortfall in enrollment, they need to evaluate the long-range implications of each and every decision. Focus on why you are doing a specific thing and who in particular it is serving. In order for the present student and prospective student to view an institution in high esteem they need to feel the school is looking out for them. If they do not feel this from an institution they will not persist to graduation.

### Marketing of College Campuses

The second potential ethical dilemma in higher education admissions is the marketing efforts individual schools are putting forward. From the time a high school student signs up for the PSAT, they become inundated with college literature. Many schools are beginning their mail lists with freshmen in high school. The mailings are always flashy and upbeat and written in the language the high school student can best understand. Schools include in these mail plans: videos, brochures and various letters ranging from the president of the institution to the school's mascot. The more creative the better chance they have of capturing the student's attention.

These publications are designed to present an image of fun; they are full of fluff and in turn offer very little content. You can look at a dozen different schools viewbooks, see the same shots of students, with the same statistics about each school and only the name will change. The latest innovation to the campus recruitment game is that of telecounseling. This is an innovation to have current students call prospective students. The more sophisticated the campus the higher the likelihood the student calling you will be from your hometown and will be the same person who calls you

throughout the entire admissions cycle. These evening conversations are meant to connect one on one with the student and to personalize the experience.

This innovation of full-time paid callers replaced the faculty phone-a-thons and the all student volunteer effort of just a few years ago. The unbelievable thing is that even before the phone was used, the method used by office of admissions to contact students was letter writing campaigns. In my undergraduate days, I would spend hours in the admissions office writing personalized letters to students I had never met. The next big innovation will be the e-mail messages to prospective students who have provided the university with their personal e-mail address. Institutions have set up distribution lists of prospective students and will begin to communicate regularly with them via cyberspace.

Institutions of higher education have also recently gone outside the world of academe to the business world for consultants. Institutions look for individuals who can tell you best how to market their product. Consultants tell you specifically the type of students you want to enroll in your institution and where to go get them. There are also very few successful institutions today that can not count amongst its admissions staff former marketing and publication experts. They are there to get into the minds of the 16 and 17 years old you are looking to get deposits from.

Why is there an ethical dilemma in the marketing of higher education? The concern is the message. Who specifically are you trying to recruit? Are you trying to attract everyone, so as to pump up your number of applications? The message is an ethical challenge because nobody has a unique one. Everyone is trying to find a gimmicky connection to the prospective student. Often the only intention is to deliver to

the prospective student a warm fuzzy feeling about the institution. My concern is that we are not providing the facts that a student can best utilize, but rather the facts that have been identified to us through market research that the student wants and needs to hear in order to enroll. Are we providing the facts or just simply the message that will most sell them on the school? Is this for the greater good of the student or just the institution? I have also had an opportunity to listen to many consultants and marketing experts on how to get the student. Most are not members of NACAC, nor do they emphasize or build in the Statement of Principles of Good Practice into their proposals.

A final implication to all of this innovation is simply what I call the recruitment curve. Put simply, what you did unique this year to make a difference will be matched by all of your competitors the next. It is a game that expands exponentially every single year when schools sit back and evaluate the numbers of students that they enrolled. They look to see which institutions they have lost out to and then attempt to find out what it was that they did differently to achieve their increase in students.

The admissions business has been ratcheted up a few notches in recent years and in the years to come this ratcheting will not take years, but more likely months. Higher education and churches have traditionally been the two institutions that have been most revered by our society. When an institution lowers itself to the tactics of big business its stature is also lowered. This is what is occurring with higher education today. Schools market themselves with the same glitz and glamour as the marketing world and the real purpose of an institution of higher learning is lost in the message. Schools of higher education are no longer looking after the greater good of the students



it enrolls, but rather they are out solely for themselves and the revenue dollar that the additional body brings in.

It is difficult to not want to run with the other schools into the world of high-tech recruitment and framing of the messages. An institution does not make or define itself in its marketing message. An institution is defined by what it is delivering in the classroom. "An institution is measured more by the quality of the student it turns out, than by the quality of student it brings in" (unknown). Higher education institutions that are concerned with ethics and values need to concentrate on what it is doing in the classroom and make that the highest quality. That in turn will make the difference in the recruitment end. If an institution increases its numbers, but those students leave before graduating, it is missing the entire point of recruiting them in the first place.

My recommendation for higher education institutions and admissions in particular is not to do what everybody else is doing with their marketing message. Instead attempt to inform the student as honestly and openly about your institution and then deliver on your promise. Advertising on MTV or in the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue is not in the best long run interest of your institution. It is best to set your standards incredibly high and then live by them. As Mark Twain said "Always do the right thing, it will please some people, but it will astonish the rest". My recommendation once again is not an easy one to follow. But, if an institution commits to it and the faculty and staff stands behind it, it will make the future a whole lot brighter.

### Training of the Staff

Higher education institutions are very dependent on staff for most of the out of classroom functions. This is very true with the admissions office as well. The important

thing to note is that the quality of the impression these individuals provide has a huge impact on the overall perception of a university. They are often the only individual students who enroll ever meet from a school, prior to beginning. Conversely, those individuals who choose not to enroll most likely have had only contact with these same individuals. Therefore, these individuals should be considered the most important in the enrollment process.

The training and preparation of these individuals is of paramount importance to an office of admissions. The training and expertise that they take on the road with them can make the difference in where a student attends. This is true of all employees in admissions, from the ones who answer the phone, to all of the employees who stand up in front of a group. These staff members can make or break an institution; they are the institution for prospective students. The professionalism they possess and the training they receive goes directly to the quality of work they do.

Most institutions hire recent college graduates to work in their entry-level positions. They are often alumni, but this is not always the case. These individuals are often call road jockeys, as they spend the majority of their time out on the road participating in college fairs and scheduling individual high school visits. Another new trend is the hiring of former high school counselors to work as regional representatives in their hometown. Schools have also begun to set up satellite offices in large markets so that they can employ someone fulltime in that metropolitan area.

All of these efforts have implications to the field of admissions. Young individuals on the road are expected to relate to prospective students. If they themselves are alumni of that institution they can relate first hand what the school is

like. The dilemma of placing young individuals on the road right after being hired is that you limit the opportunity to train them in the ethics of the office or the institution.

Utilizing retired school counselors or setting up regional office also limits the training that can take place for these individuals. They may not even make it back to campus regularly to see what is going on. These individuals may have no say in the admissions decision process and by being on the road so often may not even understand what the process is for admissions. Therefore, not training individuals appropriately places an institution at a severe disadvantage ethically because they can not represent what they do not know.

There are multiple solutions to the problem of training admissions employees. These include developing formal structured training programs that gets an individual up to speed on the office and the university. This should include attending a class or two. They should be expected to meet with students, faculty and administrators. They should also be well schooled in the history of the institution and its saga. The recruitment message as defined by the institution should be explained and they should be shadowed on their first couple of trips out of the office and their interactions with prospective students. The better trained an individual, the better impression they will give off. There should also be in place an on going program of staff development and new employees should be paired with a mentor to help them learn their way around the office, the university and college admissions as a profession.

The final component I would suggest implementing is encouraging the individuals to become professionally active in national and local professional organizations. They should be informed of and expected to adhere to the NACAC Statement of Principles of

Good Practices. These Principles should be regularly revisited and held up as the absolute minimum standards of behavior for the office. This type of commitment to the Statement must come from the top down. I would also encourage offices to spend time at least once a year on ethics retreats to determine where they stand in relation to the university goals and office goals. Unless the discussion of ethics is conducted regularly and seriously, an institution will find it hard to stay on course.

Above, I have identified some ethical questions for the future of higher education and even more specifically college admissions. The goal of making the class at all costs, marketing to the prospective student and the training of admissions staffs. All three have great implications for higher education. If one does not regularly look at who their decisions are affecting and in what way, then they need to be seriously concerned about the future. I have attempted to list possible alternative responses to all three dilemmas that I see for college admissions. I concluded each section with a recommendation for higher education.

The changes that are coming in higher education require institutions to place special emphasis on the defining of ethical lines as opposed to attempting to blur those lines. Those institutions that define and emphasize their ethical expectations for employees and their prospective students will have the best chance at succeeding in the future. Those that practice shortcuts in the college recruitment business may have success in the short run, but I would not bet on them for the long term. I hope I am around to see us come through this challenge to the ethical systems of institutions.

## References

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