

The Evolution of a Successful Admissions Director

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2004 (Volume 79, No. 3) issue of College & University, and is being reproduced/distributed with the permission of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Copyright 2004.

by Jim Scannell

Long before the GI Bill, and thus before getting a college education was a populist ideal, admission at most institutions of higher education was performed by the registrar. The role played out as one of gatekeeper. Then, with veterans returning from World War II in the 1950s, followed by the Higher Education Act in the 1960s, the business of admissions quickly evolved into the profession we know today. The qualities that initially produced successful admissions officers and the personalities attracted to this line of work early on can best be portrayed by the image of the friendly and supportive counselor. Since those halcyon days, demographic downturns, double-digit tuition increases, the failure of K-12 education, and more recently the explosion of the Web, have converged to create a complex and broad set of qualities and characteristics necessary to be successful in leading an admissions office in the 21st century.

A fundamental premise of this paper is that there exists a common set of qualities and characteristics for a successful admissions officer, despite the fact that these qualities and characteristics may play out differently based on the size of the institution, the position of the institution in the competitive food chain, the history and traditions of the school, etc. A common, working definition for a director of admission, regardless of institution, is the person responsible for the oversight and management of the day-to-day allocation of resources (human and fiscal) to implement “the plan” to recruit and admit the expected number and profile of new students. Today there are at least five qualities or characteristics that are key ingredients for success.

The successful director of admissions today must be:

1 *A developer and builder of staff.* One constant, regardless of whether the institution is public or private, large or small, profit or non-profit, top tier or bottom tier is the turnover of personnel on the recruitment team. It is, to be sure, a

“younger” person’s job. Whether classified as admissions counselor, recruitment representative, or assistant director of admissions, the average job tenure is much less than five years. This means that, even with a small staff, turnover can be an annual event, as can training. The successful admissions director not only allows people to learn and grow (and even accepts mistakes), but thrives on providing the opportunity and environment for such growth. The successful admissions director, therefore, is at least in part a coach and mentor.

Tracy Manier, Director of Admissions at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, puts it this way:

“As an admission director it’s been my great privilege to hire intelligent, motivated, and eager admission counselors, most of whom happen to be young and at the start of their careers. Given these characteristics, they want and need to be challenged. From the beginning I think it’s just as important for them to learn the “big picture” of admission and recruitment (such as how financial aid plays a role, how to use historical data to make predictions about their territory, or how a communication stream might impact yearly performance) along with the more detailed (and sometimes uninspiring) tasks of an admission counselor (such as scheduling high school visits and reviewing application paperwork). In a sense, I want to show them that there’s always something new and interesting and complicated to learn about this profession—that we’re really learning together. Soon they’ll be able to tell me something I don’t know. And yes, run the risk of losing them.”

2 *Focused on what matters.* The most productive directors of admissions have a learned ability to avoid distractions and stay attuned to the most critical processes and activities. As a society, we are close to implosion with the endless

wave of information attacking our senses and sensibilities 24x7. The admissions director has both internal constituencies as well as external clients and vendors that are constantly and continually vying for attention and resources. Being able to stay fixed on what's most important and what can actually be controlled and managed; being able to maintain enough order in an environment of chaos that the admissions team will continue moving in the right direction; and being able to cull through volumes of qualitative and quantitative data to focus on critical information is not part of any postgraduate curriculum. These things are truly learned through experience, over time. For Pat Armstrong, Director of Admissions at SUNY Buffalo, it's all about *balance*, the ingredients of which she notes are:

B	e a mentor – nurture young staff and help them flourish – it's rewarding!
A	adjust direction to meet market and world demands—flexibility is key!
L	ook for trouble! Constantly be alert to customer service and processing issues!
A	alyze daily – know where you are relative to goals every single day!
N	ew Ideas – be open to them! You need to remain competitive!
C	lear priorities are required to move staff forward to goal achievement!
E	njoy yourself, too. Take time to smell the roses – and pat yourself on the back!

- 3 *Be a public person.* The admissions director, if good, is a role model in the office, on the campus, and in the profession. What qualities do the best admissions leaders exude? Fairness, ethics, decisiveness, sensitivity, and vision to name but a few. To lead and have others follow, the director must model behavior others wish to emulate. John Mahoney, Director of Admissions at Boston College, is deliberate and intentional about modeling his behavior.

“My personal management/leadership philosophy is that I ask no one to do what I would not do myself. This approach pertains both to in the office activities, as well as activities in the field. For example, when the mail volume is huge at application deadline time, I spend time opening and sorting along with everyone else. Likewise, I try to deliver my fair share of information sessions on the campus, along with other staff members. I find it funny when parents come up to me afterwards wondering if I do this often. They don't expect to encounter the director of admission when they come to campus, but I think it's important to be as visible as possible.”

- 4 *Be a voice.* It is very important for the director of admission to represent the collective voice of the customer to the institution. The customer is of course the student,

especially future students. Think about it. If admissions leadership doesn't perform that task, who would? Academic leadership has to speak for faculty. Coaches have to speak for athletes. Student life staff speak for today's customer, not tomorrow's. Advancement specialists need to speak for alumni and donors. Presidents and financial officers serve governing boards. Regardless of whether heading up an admissions office at a research university or a community college, the student perspective needs to be known and understood as the institution reinvests, reshapes, and redirects itself to stay relevant and competitive. For example, Sue Bibeau, Director of Admissions at the United States Coast Guard Academy, recalls vividly what she needed to do to make the campus aware of the importance of the Web.

“It's no surprise to those in admissions that students prefer the Web as a starting point for their college search and some portions of the communication that takes place in the admissions process. Delivering that message at every level to the faculty, staff, and volunteer force has been a priority for the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Admissions Department in the last two years as we have invested more heavily in our Web presence and online application. Repeating the call early and often has been a significant leadership challenge. Fortunately, there were many venues from which to speak: Academic Council meetings, faculty meetings, the new Internet Content Configuration Board, our Strategic Plan, senior management team meetings.”

- 5 *Be data savvy.* The director should be enough of a “quantoid” (as opposed to a “gutician”) to use information to stay on course. While today's admissions officer doesn't have to solve quadratic equations or perform multiple regression analyses, she can't be innumerate, and she can't only trust her intuition. She can't neglect the facts. At the same time, the most successful admissions directors have an excellent intuitive sense that is used daily to direct queries or suggest what needs to be analyzed. Simply stated, it is the intersection of empiricism and informed guessing that produces the best results.

An institution looking to hire the perfect director of admissions will probably not find all of these qualities represented equally and sufficiently in one individual. They are, however, part of the profession's evolution, and thus important considerations.

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