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Admissions, Enrollment Management, and Student Affairs: Creating the Seamless Transition

Lael M. Croteau & Heather A. Maginnis

While enrollment management is a concept that first originated in the early 1970s, recently it has become more of a priority and presence in higher education and in the public eye. From the admission process through alumni/ae giving, the enrollment management philosophy shapes the total relationship students have with colleges and universities. This article examines the transformation in practices, functions, and responsibilities of admission counselors as admissions has evolved to address the broader scope of enrollment management. Two former admission counselors share their personal experiences as student affairs practitioners in an enrollment management framework.

The field of college admissions is one of the most talked about and most misunderstood professions within the realm of higher education. The complexities of the college enrollment process and the subjective decision-making of admission counselors at selective colleges and universities fascinate and frustrate both the prospective student population and the general public (Steinberg, 2002). The competition for admission into the academy continues to escalate, fueling a burgeoning industry that supports the frenzied pace and anxiety associated with the college admission process (Fallows, 2003). Within the whole system, the admission counselor holds a critical role, first marketing the college or university to the student and then ultimately deciding whether that student will be granted access. Yet, the role of the admission counselor has not always been so sophisticated. The evolution or incorporation of admissions into the more comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan has been the impetus for the multi-faceted expansion of the practices, functions, and responsibilities of the admission counselor (Johnson, 2000). This article seeks to highlight the historical development of the field of admissions into enrollment management and details the implications of this evolution for the admission counselor through the lens of two former counselors from small New England liberal arts colleges.

The Evolution of Admissions into Enrollment Management

Historical Background

To fully understand the evolution of the role of the admission counselor, it is important to first discuss the history of the field of admissions itself, leading up to its current function within enrollment management. As a profession, admissions emerged in its original form as a result of changes within higher education, namely the shift from the classical Ivy League model of education to a more practical curriculum. With the expansion of the country bringing greater variety and opportunity, students also wanted a broader curriculum that allowed them the flexibility to choose subject areas of interest. This demand forced higher education to respond to the new needs of its constituents by establishing colleges and universities that embodied the demands of the public interest, often focusing more on applicable skills and professional preparation. As a result, the increase in more diverse and specialized colleges led to the need for a standard of admission (Johnson, 2000).

By the end of the 19th Century into the early 20th Century, both the variety of the types of higher education institutions and the diversity within high school curricula across the country sparked advances in the field of admissions (Johnson, 2000). With more students able to attend college, admission officers fulfilled the role of paper shufflers, serving the administrative needs of the students on campus, while also experiencing a more formal recognition of admissions as a profession with the creation of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (Johnson, 2000). Then, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 was passed, a legislative act that provided loans and grants for the “purpose of strengthening the science, mathematics, and foreign languages and supplementing counselor personnel” (Johnson, p. 8). As a result, high school counselors increasingly sought the advice of admission officers, thus establishing partnerships between higher education institutions and high schools. With the large number of applications and consequently more selective admission criteria, admission counselors earned the reputation as gatekeepers, determining which students could be granted access to colleges and universities (Johnson).

In contrast to the 1960s, the 1970s brought changes to the landscape of higher education. As costs began to rise and student enrollment began to drop, institutions had to determine ways to market their institutions to students, enticing

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students to enroll rather than weeding them out. This strategy allowed institutions to meet their financial obligations and insure sustainability in the future. In addition, institutions did not want to sacrifice the traditional services, resources, and supports they had been providing for students. Thus, the idea of strategic enrollment management emerged as a solution, which led to the current role of the admission counselor. Higher education evolved to meet the needs of its constituents, necessitating the redefinition of the admission counselors' role in an institution, broadening the scope of their responsibilities and functions, and linking the admissions office with important academic and student affairs professionals (Johnson, 2000).

Enrollment Management Defined

In its simplest terms, enrollment management is “a comprehensive process designed to achieve and maintain the optimum recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of students” (Dolence, 1998, p. 71). Thus, the focus of an enrollment management plan is to look at students from beginning to end, taking into account the student's entire college career from the admissions process to career placement upon graduation. The success of this type of strategic plan, however, requires the involvement, communication, and collaboration of many different academic and administrative areas within an institution (Huddleston, 2000). In short, “any factor that influences a student's decision to attend or to continue enrolling” (Dolence, p. 72) is a necessary consideration for an enrollment management team.

Typically, collaboration occurs among the major forces at an institution, such as admissions, financial aid, student affairs (residential life, orientation, student activities, etc.), and academic affairs in order to address all the possible influential factors affecting the likelihood of recruitment, retention, and graduation (Borus, 1995). According to Dixon (1995), through the collaborative efforts of these key players, an enrollment management plan should seek to achieve the following four goals:

1. definition of the institution's mission, values, and characteristics;
2. incorporation of all campus sectors into marketing plans and activities;
3. strategic decision making regarding the role of financial aid; and
4. appropriate utilization of all institutional resources, including human, monetary, and technological. (p. 7)

It is particularly important that the institutional goals and attributes are clearly articulated so that each different sector involved can present a uniform view of the institution and what benefits or services it offers to students and their families. Overall, the enrollment management plan seeks to have all campus areas involved in the successful marketing of a college; a result of “knowing one's institution, having full understanding of the image and perception of the institution, and merging these effectively with marketing publications and activities” (Wright, 1995, p. 12).

The implementation of a strong enrollment management plan is comparable to a well-designed Web site. Many colleges and universities create Web sites reflective of enrollment management priorities, meaning that there is a consistent appearance and message throughout the Web site, coupled with links that quickly and easily connect the visitor to other aspects of the institution. In this technological age, one can assume that many students use an institution's homepage as the starting point for learning about the institution. Consequently, it is essential for the homepage to connect students with important, clearly visible links to other offices or services of the institution, such as academic affairs, athletics, and residential life. Ideally, each link that students visit from the homepage provides important information that the students are searching for in the framework of a consistent articulation of the institution's mission and values. In contrast, when a Web site has convoluted or complicated links with inconsistent messages and information, the student becomes lost and frustrated. An effective Web site allows students to navigate the site in a seamless manner, just as the enrollment management plan connects each individual sector of an institution into an integrated whole in order to best serve its students. Therefore, as the first point of contact, the admissions office is equivalent to the homepage, providing answers to basic questions and then pointing students in the direction of other important offices and resources.

The overarching goal for these different segments of the campus community within an enrollment management framework is to “determine what students need or want and what the climate should be, and then working together to achieve those ends” (Borus, 1995, p. 48). There are many ways to achieve this. For instance, through institutional assessment, the data collected in relation to what students think about a particular institution and its services, as well as their perception or realized experiences regarding the institution's success in procuring positive outcomes, can guide student affairs and high-level administrators as to how services or programs can be improved. The same goes for faculty and the area of academic affairs; assessment of academic programs can indicate which areas are of greatest interest or most popular and which need to be eliminated or adjusted to better serve the students' needs. Such assessment can also

identify areas of strength for an institution, including areas that public relations or marketing may want to highlight in publications and other media materials. These are just a few examples. The next section illustrates the implications of the enrollment management plan and this network of collaboration for the admission counselor.

Professional Implications for Admission Counselors

Admission counselors serve as catalysts for the successful execution of the enrollment management plan and, therefore, must perform many roles in order to turn a prospective student into an enrolled student. Through these many roles, admission counselors serve:

as the eyes and the ears of the institution . . . [and] take the pulse of society and interact not only with students but also with parents, high school and community personnel, the media, the political world, alumni, donors, and the general public. (Johnson, 2000, p. 5)

Fundamentally, due to admissions' responsibility for the successful recruitment and enrollment of students, the admission counselor must be an expert on the institution he or she represents, accurately conveying the values of completing an undergraduate education at that institution. To illustrate the variety of roles and activities assumed by admission counselors within an enrollment management plan, each author will describe her personal experience as part of this type of campus collaboration.

The Strategic Marketer's Role: Heather's Lens

As an admission counselor working within the enrollment management framework, my experience reflected the goals of strategic planning on a comprehensive scale. Beginning with my attendance at a regional training conference for new counselors and my institution-specific training for my daily work in the office, my initiation into the field made me aware that my job would be much more than simply visiting high schools and reading applications. Even the language signified a more sophisticated role. I was deemed a territory manager, meaning that for the areas of the country I was designated to serve I was required to research high schools that might be important to target and, once identified, establish working relationships with guidance or school counselors in those areas.

Perhaps more important than simply understanding and working with targeted student populations was gaining an understanding of the national climate: characteristics, qualities, or values students look for in an undergraduate experience; the cultures of these varied groups of students; and the demographics of this overall prospective college student population. These fundamental questions guided my office's recruitment plan. As a staff, we strategically determined which areas of the country were underrepresented on our campus, crafting travel schedules that reflected this need to diversify. We responded to the institutional goals set by the President and his Cabinet, brainstorming ways to provide targeted programming that was accessible to more students; seeking to diversify the student body geographically, internationally, racially, and socio-economically; and most importantly, planning a course of action for reaching the enrollment projections that enabled the college to maintain itself financially. As the admission staff sought to begin the important function of recruiting prospective students, travel planning involved a great deal of calculated thought and action.

Outside of recruitment, a large part of my role in the office revolved around assessment and marketing. In order to create admission publications that appealed to the prospective student population, we had to first understand how recently admitted students perceived our college. By using the Admitted Student Questionnaire, a survey instrument designed to capture perceptions and opinions of admitted students regarding a particular college or university, I was able to grasp a big picture sense about what mattered to high school seniors when selecting an undergraduate institution. For instance, by identifying what characteristics or amenities impacted their ultimate college choice, the data provided by these admitted students allowed our office to determine areas within our institution that were responding to customer demand and areas needing improvement in order to achieve successful enrollment.

Findings from this type of assessment effort also directly impacted the other members of the enrollment management plan. Our admissions office needed to consult with faculty to determine what types of academic opportunities were available, how faculty approached their pedagogy, and the extent of their relationships with students outside of class. We needed to work closely with the Director of Student Activities to find out how students spent their time outside of class, and the availability of leadership opportunities, service trips, and so forth. To properly address aesthetic concerns about

the campus, representatives from the admission office met with the department of Residence Life, the President's Cabinet, and other master campus strategists to find out about building plans and scheduled renovations of both residence halls and classrooms. As a final example, our office periodically worked with career services and alumni/ae relations to ascertain how well our institution provided crucial professional preparatory skills to the undergraduates and to hear about the successes of alumni/ae in a wide variety of professional areas, as well as esteemed graduate schools across the country. The relationship I developed with University staff was reciprocal because each office also gained valuable information from the admission staff. This information often guided their planning and evaluation of new and existing programming, training, and curricula.

Finally, one of the most important parts of my position as an admission counselor was my involvement with prospective students and their families. First impressions are crucial for many students, and the admissions office is often students' primary introduction to our institution. As a result, my job was to ensure that students and families had a positive experience on campus. I greeted visitors, spoke at information sessions, met informally with students, and corresponded with students via e-mail, all in order to provide them with the best possible representation of the institution. More importantly, my representation needed to convey to students that their experience with the admissions office was not an isolated occurrence, but rather a clear indication of the level of service and support students could expect from their four-year career at this institution. To effectively do so required the efforts of the entire enrollment management team so that once enrolled, students felt connected to the institution and persisted to graduation.

The Student Affairs Professionals' Role: Lael's Lens

Early in my first year as an admission counselor, the facilitators of a workshop I attended asked the group of new admission staff whether we considered ourselves recruiters or counselors. For me, the term recruitment seemed less personal, more strategic, and more business-like. I viewed my role as someone who was a resource for students as they tried to decide the best choice and fit for them in the college search. It was important to me to remember each person and their needs as individuals. For this reason, the admissions profession and I were a good match. During my own college admission process I faced many challenges, and the personalized approach taken by my admission counselor made all the difference. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the numerous options and seemingly identical opportunities at many schools. Understanding the process was not easy, and the search through college guides and view books was cumbersome. The guidebooks all looked the same; the messages from each school blurred together. My college search took place long before the boom of technology, so I relied heavily on interactions I had with the people at the institutions I visited.

The personal guidance I received from the admission counselor at my college made the institution more approachable for me. As I persisted through the admission process and got to the point where financial aid was the final factor, my institution was personal and flexible. The admission staff advocated for me and helped connect me to resources on campus. The admission staff certainly followed an enrollment management plan, but their plan would not have worked without an understanding of how to direct my needs and guide me toward available resources. Beginning with the admission process, I think student needs must be understood universally throughout the college or university. It is not just the role of student affairs educators to nurture student needs, but rather, "student affairs educators need to educate the rest of the campus about student characteristics, student needs, the ways the campus can better serve them, and the ways in which the campus serves them well already" (Howard & Levine, 2004, p. 23).

I began my profession as an admission counselor directly after graduating from college, with the perception that my primary charge would be to travel throughout the New England region of the United States of America to talk about the school I loved. I was equally drawn to the opportunity to make connections with students whose admission processes were as daunting as mine. I wanted to make the process as user-friendly for prospective students as my admission counselor made it for me. I viewed this as an exciting adventure. Work? How could a job that asked me to talk from the heart about a place I love be work? As a recent graduate I could not have asked for a better job opportunity.

After a year in admissions, my initial perspective of my job developed into a deeper understanding of why I was drawn to the field. My actions became more intentional as I experienced the cyclical nature of the job, and the key role that my fellow admission counselors and I played in the process. Each day my calendar held three or four high school visitations, one or two interviews, and weekly college fairs that allowed me to develop stronger relationships with guidance staff, prospective students, and parents. Each visit or interaction with students was followed up with a personal note, postcard, or friendly email. When I returned to campus after my travel season, I felt confident that I had made strong connections with students, enabling them to better understand what they could gain by attending our college.

Back in the office, I coordinated personal communications to enhance and nurture connections with students. I read applications for my territory, sent birthday cards, and continued corresponding with students and guidance staff. I collaborated with a team of admission staff to provide on-campus visitation experiences, accepted student open houses, and performed outreach programming to under-represented students. These activities were part of a formal communication strategy, which included less traditional methods of communication such as instant messaging and chat-rooms geared toward reaching technologically savvy students.

In addition to developing relationships with prospective students, an essential part of my job was to coordinate opportunities for student leaders to make connections with prospective students through the tour guide and accepted student overnight hosting programs. As such, I viewed this role with a student affairs lens. I worked closely with current undergraduates to develop their leadership talents, assisted them with making connections on campus and facilitated opportunities for them to link their experiences to the prospective student process.

Therefore, as an admission counselor, I viewed myself as a student affairs educator, perhaps because I was a graduate of the college where I worked or because I had been so involved in student affairs as an undergraduate. Regardless of the reason, I was, and remain, committed to student success within the context of the strategic enrollment management plan. I strived for a sense of balance between strategic planning, marketing, and an understanding of campus culture to best comprehend the needs of students.

Conclusion

We began this article by discussing the evolution of the field of admissions in the broader concept of an enrollment management plan. Specifically, we observed the trends that have brought admission counselors from paper shufflers to marketing strategists and student affairs professionals. Each admission counselor now becomes an institutional expert in areas such as academic offerings, athletic criteria, financial aid, and opportunities for involvement, in an attempt to answer the important question of “Why is XYZ University worth \$30,000?”

The dissemination of this information to prospective students takes not only a carefully planned strategy, but also a deeper knowledge of the institution itself. Admission counselors gain this knowledge through their personal involvement in institutional operations. They move “beyond the transfer of information” into a model which finds them working collaboratively with administrators in student affairs, financial aid, and academic affairs to “determine what students need or want and what the climate should be, and then working together to achieve those ends” (Borus, 1995, p. 48). We concluded the results of such collaborations among admission counselors include:

- (a) Stronger personal connections to the campus community,
- (b) The capability to connect students with services throughout campus,
- (c) A better understanding of the needs of students,
- (d) Deeper beliefs in the values and mission of the institution,
- (e) A clearer understanding of what faculty offer and expect from students,
- (f) More authentic approaches to counseling.

The outcome from these collaborations is clear. The strategic marketing and personal counselor roles of admission counselors find an even balance, creating a strong enrollment management plan through more intentional connections with individuals on campus. When admission counselors connect better with individuals on campus, they are better able to market the institution, establishing a heightened connection with prospective students. This connection subsequently leads to prospective students feeling more attached to the institution and results, hopefully, in a higher yield of admitted students. The enrollment management plan benefits all involved by creating a consistent vision that articulates of the practical application of the institution’s mission, encourages students not only to enroll but to remain for the duration of their undergraduate experience and, enables graduates to proceed to successful personal and professional lives.

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