



Commentary

Ideas and opinions influencing student services

It's Time that Colleges Invest in their Undergraduate Admissions Staff

Tara P. Nicola and Mark E. Butt

America's colleges have not escaped the deleterious effects of the "Great Resignation." Overworked, underpaid, and burned out, higher education professionals are increasingly fleeing academia in search of alternative careers (*e.g.*, Ellis 2021; Seltzer 2022). Included in this exodus have been undergraduate admissions professionals (Cakuls 2022). Given their critical role selecting each incoming class, admissions officers are instrumental in defining the legacy of their institutions. But high turnover rates and low morale among admissions professionals—perennial issues that the Great Resignation has now further exacerbated—raise serious concerns about the ability of admissions offices to undertake this important work. It is for this reason that now, perhaps more than ever before, university leaders and senior admissions offi-

cers must intentionally invest in their undergraduate admissions staff.

Admissions work is not for the faint of heart. Each fall, admissions professionals kick off the admissions cycle by conducting high school visits in small towns and big cities across the country, traversing the road for weeks on end. As the winter approaches, this dizzying travel season dissolves into a mad dash to process, read, and discuss hundreds, if not thousands, of deeply personal applications each week. Selection deadlines are non-negotiable, and as such, working up to sixteen hours a day plus weekends is not uncommon. Immediately after admissions decisions are made in the spring, the officers then turn their attention to orchestrating campus open houses and other events for admitted students. By the time summer arrives, staff are

already scheduling their fall programming and gearing up for yet another admissions season.

The relentless nature of this never-ending cycle has led to high staff turnover within the admissions profession. A national survey of admissions officers sponsored by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that more than half (55%) planned to look for a new job within three years, with the vast majority considering roles outside of the admissions field (Phair 2014). Heavy travel schedules and concerns about work-life balance were frequently cited as reasons for pursuing alternative careers.

Low pay is also a major contributing factor. According to CUPA-HR, admissions roles are some of the lowest paid across all professional higher education positions. The median salary nationally for entry-level admissions counselors—who are usually tasked with the bulk of the travel and reading responsibilities—is only \$42,000, meaning that half of counselors receive even smaller paychecks (Bichsel, *et al.* 2020). These low wages coupled with the lack of a defined career path, limited access to professional development, and an untenable work-life balance make admissions work far from an appealing career for young and experienced professionals alike.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the typical staffing challenges that admissions offices face. Given many institutions imposed hiring freezes and widespread budget cuts over the past few years, admissions staffing shortages are not uncommon. Notably, Occidental College entered last year's application reading season with a quarter of its 27 undergraduate admissions positions unfilled (Finnerty, Lin, and Berke 2021). At the same time, many colleges have seen significant increases in application volume (Jaschik 2022), driven in part by the burgeoning test-optional movement (Bennett 2021), that are only further straining already understaffed offices.

The growth in applications at a time when institutions lack sufficient admissions support staff is especially concerning at selective colleges, which rely on labor intensive systems to review applicants. Through their holistic review process, these colleges strive to consider each applicant within the context of their

secondary school. In practice, this means methodologically reviewing each component of the application file, including academic transcripts/credentials, school profiles, multiple student writing samples, letters of recommendation, and other information such as interview narratives. The shift away from considering test scores has only increased the scrutiny of these documents. Because this evaluation process requires the careful attention of admissions officers in reviewing the myriad application components, limited staff capacity is fundamentally at odds with the nature of holistic review.

These rising application numbers, marginal wages, and a robust marketplace outside of higher education have created a near perfect storm in the higher education admissions landscape, threatening the ability of admissions offices to perform their jobs effectively and equitably. We believe, however, that university leaders—both within and outside of the admissions office—can help their admissions team emerge from this storm stronger than they were before through intentionally investing in their admissions staff. We offer the following recommendations to help them do so:

- Create mechanisms for feedback from admissions staff at all levels. Learning about staff needs is the first step in building a healthy admissions office culture that promotes staff success rather than burnout. Through distributing a survey, conducting structured individual interviews, or implementing a combination of both, admissions leaders can begin to understand the experiences and needs of their staff. Especially at larger, more complex institutions, senior leaders can be far removed from the processes they oversee and thus lack awareness of staff needs. Feedback mechanisms can close those knowledge gaps. At institutions that have experienced turnover, this feedback process not only can shed light on why staff have resigned but also can affirm to current team members that senior leadership is committed to supporting them.
- Provide growth opportunities and train junior admissions officers for future responsibilities. Research has shown that employees highly value professional development opportunities and are

less likely to leave organizations that promote their continued learning (Farrow, Kitto, and Knudsen 2021). To retain staff, admissions leaders should create opportunities to connect the marketplace of professional development with the interests of their employees. For example, admissions leaders can cover the cost of staff membership in professional associations, or sponsor their attendance at conferences, seminars, and workshops. In the post-COVID era, virtual programming offered by NACAC and other education organizations is ubiquitous, convenient for staff, and also cost effective. Providing these opportunities to junior staff is especially critical—remember that they are the future leaders of your institution. Invest in them accordingly.

- Conduct an expertise assessment to guide staffing decisions. Building a strong team requires understanding its current strengths and weaknesses. Inventory the skill set of your admissions staff, and identify areas where the office would benefit from

additional support or specialized skills. Internal team members are often the best solutions to in-house needs given the deep institutional knowledge they possess; consequently, promoting from within should always be considered. But when the hiring of new staff is necessary, carefully identify who should occupy these roles. Think about what experiences are, and are not, currently in the room of admissions decision-makers. Young alumni, former attorneys, Ph.D.s side-stepping off the faculty track, musicians, statisticians, poets, ex-professional athletes, chemists, former high school teachers, and CBO instructors can all find a niche in this field and offer valuable insight into cultivating the leaders of tomorrow. The best admissions committees are those that harmonize a wide range of lived experiences and bring deep knowledge of and appreciation for the institution they serve.

- Explore how to ethically leverage technology to support the work of admissions staff. Over the

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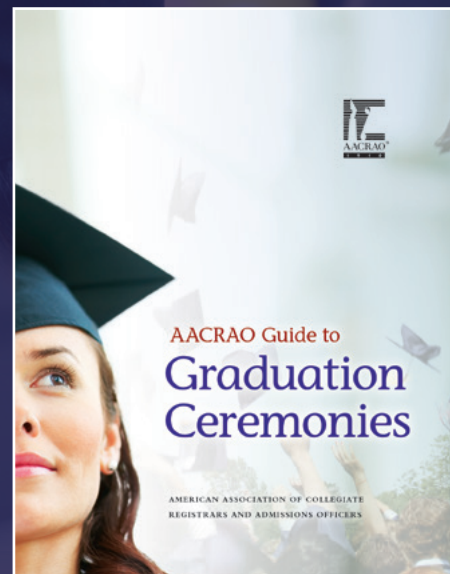
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past 20 years, countless new tools, algorithms, and platforms have emerged in the college admissions landscape (Kelliher 2021). But leaders must tread carefully as they consider whether this technology can and should bridge gaps they cannot meet with human capital. For example, colleges are increasingly incorporating complex, AI predictive enrollment models into their selection processes. While this technology can improve the working conditions of admissions staff by reducing the number of applications they read or the amount of time they devote to each file, it also raises significant questions about equity and the overall integrity of the admissions process itself. Understanding the limitations of this technology and any of its potential negative implications for staff and for students is essential.

Admissions officers impact nearly every facet of university life. Making sure that the championship

football team has talented incoming recruits, that the pep band has enough trombone players, and that the classics department has a critical mass of students falls on the shoulders of enrollment managers. Through overseeing the selection of applicants, they have a heavy hand in defining an institution's legacy and the values and priorities associated with it. If admissions officers do their jobs right, residence halls are filled, university coffers are overflowing, and the football team is set for another successful season. If they don't, chaos can unfold as institutions try to stem the widespread damage to their finances and to students' academic and extracurricular experiences that can result from failing to meet enrollment targets.

The insufficient compensation and professional support that admissions officers have received is at odds with the critical roles they play supporting a university's bottom line and enacting its strategic priorities. It is finally time undergraduate admissions professionals receive the institutional support they need and deserve.

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