

/ CHAPTER FORTY-TWO /

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So You Want to be a Director of Admissions?

Obviously not everyone who works in college admissions is cut out to be a Director of Admissions. As you have seen evidenced in your experience in the profession, a number of recent college graduates spend a year or two on the road before they seek that initial “real job.” It’s often joked that one should not waste time getting to know new roadrunners, because so few will be around next year. It seems that, somewhere around the five-year mark though, the real separation occurs.

Those who have a real affinity for admissions work begin to distance themselves professionally from those who are just “doing a job.” One group seems not to see the applicability of experiences from their current situation, while the other group realizes that all of their experiences during those first few years are serving to prepare them for a job that will come open five or ten years from now. The simple (and crucial) truth is simply that the perfect job opportunity comes to those who are prepared.

Scope of the Position

The role of the Director of Admissions and the scope of the job will vary by institution. In some situations the focus of the responsibility is almost entirely on recruitment. In others the primary focus is on application processing. Most positions will have responsibility for both

areas. Orientation and other new student initiatives may also come under the oversight of the Director of Admissions. In many cases, the position will fall within the realm of Enrollment Management, and include either significant knowledge of or oversight of financial aid and other student enrollment resources.

Since it stands to reason that not every vacant position will be a good opportunity for you (and conversely, that you would not be a good hire for every institution), it becomes very important to get as accurate a picture as possible of the entire position. The right admissions management position is heavenly. The wrong position can be, well, not heavenly. Be mindful that, sometimes, the best career decisions end up being the job offers that were declined. Before seriously considering an opportunity, you should have your concerns answered about (among other things):

- ❑ **EXPECTATIONS:** What are the expectations of the position? Are there specific expectations of outcomes? Are there specific expectations as to processes? If you will not be answering directly to the President, does the person to whom you will answer share the same institutional vision as the President? For that matter, does the institution have a discernible institutional vision? What is the institutional evaluation process? Will you be given the opportunity for a periodic evaluation of how your performance is meeting expectations? In short, the institution will have very definite expectations of you. Since you will be responsible for meeting these expectations, you want to understand as many of them as possible going in.
- ❑ **ENVIRONMENT:** Does the physical environment of the place appeal to you? How important is it to you for the institution to fit a certain physical or institutional image? While experiences at varied types of institutions can be a very significant asset in preparation for a position, coming from and going to extremes in institutional size, emphases, physical location, and student body makeup can lead to an initial experience of culture shock (if not shell shock) for admissions professionals going to work for an institution which operates at the edge of (or beyond) their collective comfort zones.
- ❑ **THE HISTORY OF THE POSITION:** Why is the position vacant? What is the life expectancy of the position of Director of Admissions at this institution? Where have those who have left the position gone? Would you be following a dearly beloved icon who “always did it this way,” or would you be following someone who was run out of town on a rail? There is a big difference in how the individuals walking into those two situations are viewed. Would you be maintaining and enhancing, or would you be rebuilding? Was there an in-house candidate who did not get the position and will now be on your staff?
- ❑ **PERSONNEL:** What is the current staffing situation? What changes will you need to make? How much authority do you have to make any such changes? Would you be walking into a situation where you have personal knowledge of staff abilities, or would the entire staff be new to you? What are their current responsibilities, and how would they be amenable to changes in responsibility? What is the current pay structure, and

how much influence would you have as to salary issues? Are there significant in-house tensions that would need to be dealt with early on? (One note: Although far more time and emphasis is usually placed on evaluating professional positions, you would do well to pay special attention to the support staff. Most of them know how to do everything in the office and many of them have skills that are more difficult to replace than those of your professional staff.)

- **BUDGET:** What is the actual budget for the office? How much is fixed and how much is discretionary? How much control would you have over budget decisions for the office? Based upon the level of budgetary experience you have, what assistance will you need in overseeing this area?

As a final thought for those interested in moving into Director's positions, keep in mind that your behavior in your first few years can have a great impact on job opportunities available to you in the future. Especially for those seeking a position at another institution in their own state or region, their cumulative past actions, behaviors, and perceived professionalism greatly impact whether or not they are granted an interview. A decision *not* to interview a particular candidate may be arrived at, based upon actions from years before, in light of situations that may have occurred in or outside of work. In short, from the day you begin in this profession, you are always interviewing for a Director's position. Whether or not you ever choose to apply for a position is inconsequential. Every day in admissions is preparation for a job as Director of Admissions.

First Year on the Job

After a thoughtful selection process you find yourself as the new Director of Admissions. Now what? In this section we will break down your first year and a half into three sections, mirroring a typical semester system. The following outline for your first year is meant to present ideas and processes you can accomplish in addition to running the daily operations of the admissions office. They should even help you be more efficient as you work to meet the many demands of your new job.

These guidelines and perspectives are generalized in consideration of the differing roles of an admissions office. As mentioned earlier, some colleges separate recruitment from application processing, and the administrative role of the Director of Admissions can vary drastically depending on the size and profile of an institution. These guidelines are designed to be generally applicable. Please use the guidelines as exactly that, guidelines. Consult your personal professional network, talk with your new supervisor, and engage in professional development opportunities to tailor these guidelines to fit your unique situation.

Semester 1: Be a Student

You are part of an institution of higher education. Assume the role of student and learn as much as you can. As a student of your new position and possibly a new institution, recall and implement those skills that have helped you in your previous formal education. Not the late-night cram sessions and term paper all-nighters, but the analytical problem-solving skills and organizational techniques needed to be a successful student.

Learn the history of the institution, in particular the history and role of your new office. Take notes! The personnel who work for you and those who have previously been in the office (if you have access to them) can be instrumental in helping you more thoroughly understand the *context* of your role and your office. In your first month, set aside at least one hour to interview each of these people. Keep the interview informal, but organized. We recommend that you prepare a set of questions or topics that you want to discuss with each team member. Again, take notes. Do this even if you have worked in the same office for years. You will be surprised at what you learn.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS/TOPICS

- ❑ What do you see the role of the admissions office at Great University in Perfect Setting, USA?
- ❑ How would you define your role in this admissions office?
- ❑ What do you see as the major strengths/weaknesses of this office/University?
- ❑ If you could change three things about Great University, what would they be?
- ❑ What are your personal/professional goals, and how can I help you accomplish them?

Finally, these interviews are your opportunity to communicate your ideas and framework while seeking feedback. This can help clarify expectations for everyone and establish a communication channel for the future.

Next, tailor the above questions for interviews with your extended campus network. Identify the five to twenty people on campus whom you will be working with most closely, and schedule the time to interview each of them. They may be members of the enrollment management team, or perhaps the other directors in the student services area on campus. Discuss with your staff and supervisor whom you should interview. Who are the people most key to your (office's) success?

Read. Read the catalog—cover to cover. This may not be the most engaging part of your new job. But in your effort to be a subject matter expert, reading this document may be one of the best uses of your time. While you read, take notes. Mark up the catalog. Make sure that you read with a critical eye. You will likely find errors and omissions; make note of them. Discuss your questions with the editor of the catalog. Give the editor the first opportunity to discuss discrepancies with the people responsible for the content. And then, keep reading. Read the most recent versions of your alumni mailings, your admissions publications, Web

site, vision document, strategic plan, reports to the governing board, and each of the letters in your communication plan. Again, as a good student, take notes.

Finally, in regard to your “first semester learning curriculum,” take the time to understand the technical tools of your new position. If the office has a student information system (SIS) different from the one you are used to, this learning process can be demanding. If the SIS system is similar, the learning curve will be less steep, but even so you may need to relearn parts of the system, depending on how your new university applies the system.

ENGAGE YOURSELF IN CAMPUS CULTURE

Attend as many community events as you can. You will be exceptionally busy in your new job, and you need to make sure you do not become isolated. Some non-mandatory campus events are mandatory for you. Athletic events, student performances, open lecturers/forums, student government meetings, and alumni gatherings are examples of some of the events you should try to attend. You do not have to attend all of them, and you do not even have to stay for the entire event. But you need to make an effort to engage yourself across campus cultures.

This is important for two reasons. First, it is a good political move. Being seen as engaged in campus culture increases your credibility. Perhaps more importantly, this is an extension of your education. You will learn about and know first-hand the details of your community. In order to accurately convey the “feel” of your campus to prospective students, it helps if you can speak from recent experience.

Warning! Do not overextend yourself. Be cautious of volunteering to help with each of the above-mentioned events or to serve on extraneous committees. Your first job is Director of Admissions, and you need to focus on that. Further, after a year of observation you will better know where you may want to insert yourself to enhance your campus culture.

FINAL THOUGHT ON THE FIRST SEMESTER

At first, make only those changes that are necessary. You should be careful to avoid making changes in order to “put your mark” on the fundamental operations of the admission office until you have time to fully appreciate the current system. If you start making what are perceived to be unnecessary changes early on, you may find reluctance from your staff when you want to make more crucial changes down the road. Also, by limiting the number and scope of changes you make early in your tenure, you may avoid having to revise or upgrade those changes in a few months. Of course, if you recognize a fundamental flaw in your office, it is your responsibility to make the appropriate change.

Organizational Tip

Gather twelve folders and label them by month. Keep copies of important documents that come up in the current month. Even if you fully understand and trust a current filing system, take the time to duplicate some effort here. You may be able to do this electronically, but if your office is not completely paperless, take the time to make hard copies of important e-mails and store them in these files. Make sure you put any policy documents in this file. Also be sure to include notes on any admission office events like visitation days and any new notifications you send to students (deadline reminders, invitations to special events, etc.). This file system becomes your memory of your first year. Give yourself a break and have the discipline to maintain this file system for at least one year. Then you will not have to reinvent the wheel next time around.

Semester 2: Staffing

Engage yourself in actively managing your staff. This does not mean you need to micro-manage your staff. Rather, you need to appropriately participate in the operations of your office. Take the time to be a good manager. Often, Directors of Admission are so busy with their own projects that they forget one of the most important aspects of the job: helping their staff operate as efficiently as possible. Use your own management style, techniques, and system, but make the time to actively engage as a manager. Hopefully, you will have adopted and implemented a reporting evaluation structure (either yours or the institution's) in the first semester. Now you need to take this a step further. Do not rely on quarterly evaluations as your opportunity to manage. Take the interviews from the first semester and review them. Are there issues you can address? If so, now is the time to do it. Show your staff that you were listening to them and that you are there to support them.

PLAN YOUR VISION

We warned against making unnecessary changes in your first semester. Now is the time to plan the changes you may want to make. Picture the office in two years. What do you want it to look like? How should it be operating? Start with a broad perspective and your own vision statement for your office. Then begin to fill in the blanks. What is it going to take to make the necessary changes? Be sure to include the effective parts of the current office operations. In the end you will create a document that you can share with your staff and the campus leadership. Be sure to talk to both of these constituencies about this document before you unveil it (next semester). By including these constituencies you will help build ownership and you will be able to recognize any potential conflicts.

Be careful not to try to do this all at once. Instead, set aside a little time (once a week perhaps) that you can make note of your thoughts for that week. Also keep track of the details. If you want to use a new software product that you see at a conference, make note of its cost. Take the time to reflect. If you try to do this all at once your vision could end up tainted by the most pressing topic of that particular week. By working on this a little each week, you keep your plan fresh and comprehensive. This should be a fun project for you. Keep it that way. Just because it is fun does not mean it is not important. Make a little time to work on this each week.

RESEARCH

Yes that's right, more research. In the first semester you researched what was already out there. Now you need to take a good look at what you *know* and determine what you *do not know*. What are the institutional questions that are not answered?

Use a process similar to that of developing your vision. Set aside a little time each week to make note of what information is not readily available. Depending on your school, you may have resources to find this information relatively quickly. Regardless of the methodology for

institutional research at your school, try to approach this process with the big picture in mind. Rather than asking for a new report each week, take your time to figure out what information you really need and how it ties together. Then discuss this with the appropriate people on campus. Maybe the information is already available; it is just spread out over several offices.

Engage the other constituencies (again similar to creating your vision) who are the purveyors of institutional knowledge. If you are lucky enough to have an office of institutional research on your campus, buy them some doughnuts. They will be key to your ability to make effective decisions. If you do not have such an office, find individuals who may be in need of the same type of information, and get them together with you and the people who can gather that information. Buy them all lunch and discuss how you can most easily get the data you need.

In the end, make sure you have good data (specific to the decisions you need to make) that is well organized.

Semester 3: Transitioning

It is probably safe to assume that if you have successfully navigated the first year as a director, then you have been focused and busy. While you probably have not had a lot of time to evaluate results, you are hopefully beginning to see some of your work making an impact. Your vision will be well thought out, and people will recognize that you did your homework before you insisted on making the changes necessary to move your office and the institution forward. You move from a transitional stage to truly making this your office.

The Second Year and Beyond

The second year, in comparison, is the time to look up and look ahead. This is the time to capitalize on all of the foundation-building that you have done to this point, and to formulate longer-term strategies. This shift of your focus will help you become a more successful leader as you expand your role.

A good way to frame this progression into the second year is to focus on developing four areas: *evaluation*, *implementation of long-term strategic plans*, *refinement of your leadership role*, and *advocacy for your office*. Admittedly, if you had a wildly successful first year, some of these may just be continuations of what you have already started. More than likely though, you have not had time to address these issues as deeply as one should.

Useful evaluation in the second year should piggy-back on the review that has already been done as part of the first year. As you try to measure your own success, a good question to ask is, “Are my strengths serving the job well?” The hope is that you have been able to notice some of your abilities moving the staff and office forward. If you sense that you have been able to build trust, develop a sense of direction, and accomplish several goals in the first year, your unique qualities and leadership style are probably adding value. If that is not the case, you need to refocus your efforts and make adjustments that will increase your value as a leader. Generally this means simplifying: do a few things and do them right.

You should also be able to see points where your judgment has been accurate and beneficial, furthering the goals of the office. It is entirely possible that some of your decisions were misguided—or even just plain wrong. Moving into the second year is a great time to acknowledge any missteps and to make necessary adjustments to minimize the chances of that happening as you move ahead.

As you evaluate yourself, the progress of the office should be evaluated as well. Hopefully, you were able to set some specific goals for staff development and expectations early in your tenure. If so, use those as benchmarks to review the growth of the entire unit. If no objectives were laid out, then an evaluation based on some new, clear criteria can still be useful. The key is to show areas within the office that have improved; demonstrate characteristics of the staff that have been strengthened; and marshal evidence that the entire program has generally moved forward. The bottom line is, if the office is better than when you got there, then you are doing some things right.

In addition to evaluating yourself and the office, the second year is an excellent time to evaluate the institution and how you and your office fit into its strategy. Unless you were fortunate enough to walk into a place that already had a great strategy and understanding of its own identity, you probably have based a lot of your work on information pieced together as necessary. By the second year, though, you should have a good idea of what the institution is all about. Now you can begin to define and segment markets, gain an understanding of what brings those key constituents to your school, and review the various messages that are being delivered across the many parts of the campus. The goal here is to find additional areas in which to build consensus and improve continuity. If you find that your office is moving in a direction that supports the university as a whole and with a clear purpose, you should feel good about the work that you have done and continue to build on that momentum.

These evaluations should help you to become extremely knowledgeable and familiar with your institution. That awareness of yourself and your surroundings, coupled with the trust that you have built across campus, will help you as you continue putting in place a plan that will distinguish you and your office. Your strategy should be distinct and uniquely formulated to fit the needs of your current institution. The tendency at times can be to implement familiar ideas and use the same tactics that previous institutions implemented. And sometimes the easy mistake is to use a competitor's strategy that does not quite fit your own school. But to maximize your value and to create a leading admissions office, your decisions should be based on a unique identity, defined and developed through your thoughtful examination of the institution.

As you continue to evaluate and move toward developing the long-term strategy, you will probably notice something different about your schedule. You will more than likely find yourself trying to balance the time required to do the daily work and the long-term strategic thinking. Most people who advance to these positions are able to do so because they have been hard workers and have had very result-oriented success. In other words, you probably

have been promoted to this position because you work hard, can solve problems, can clearly communicate, and get things done.

Now that you are the director those daily things remain important, but you also have to be able to give some of that up now. You no longer can only be a productive worker. You now have to schedule “thought” time. It can be difficult to split time between the work and the development of ideas. For example, if you have been a problem-solver, it can be very difficult to not be the first to solve a problem. But proper training of staff and delegation can help. If you prepare your staff to assume more of those responsibilities and give them the autonomy to do it their way, then you will be able to commit more time to development, planning, and strategic thinking. If you are not able to make that transition, then you risk not being able to provide the leadership and direction that you should. If you spend too much of your time in the role of solving the immediate problems, you will fail in fulfilling your role as leader and strategic planner.

As you continue to transition into the position of leadership, you will also find that an important part of your role is to advocate for your office. You should be as good at marketing your own office and the work that you do as you are at marketing your institution. This advocacy could start by being as simple as keeping others informed about your office’s challenges and successes. It also can include bringing proposals to upper administration that will improve your office—do not be afraid to suggest improvements. The most obvious reason to do this is that it develops a level of trust within the office that will create loyalty within the office staff. It also can gain the respect of administrators for you and your office. They will hopefully see that your goals are in line with the institution’s goals and that your efforts are improving the institution from “the middle.” Their support and trust will make your job easier down the road.

As you push to move the objectives of your office, you need to collaborate with others across campus so as to gain more opportunities to share your vision for the entire institution. You need to introduce your vision to your boss and the admissions office staff. Then you should make the time to meet with the other change agents on campus. This can be done formally (in campus forums, committee meetings, etc.) or informally (in the hall, over coffee). Every chance you get, pitch your vision and the steps required to get there to anyone who will listen. Talk to the faculty, staff in other offices, cooks, and security personnel. All of them are part of the picture.

Your goal is to align as many resources across campus as you need to implement the changes you need to make. The faculty will better understand how their visits with prospective students affect enrollment. The cooks will understand why you may make special requests on visitation days. The security contingent will be sympathetic to parking issues during major events. Find those who buy into your vision and give them a role. Let them get excited and involved. Focus on the big picture and let others manage the details (as much as possible).

Understanding where and who you are by evaluating what you do is necessary to develop meaningful long-term strategy. A thoughtful long-term game-plan, with purposes and methods that are suited to your institution, can help your office work with relative ease toward common goals. Accomplishing those goals as part of your strategy will give you the opportunity to build more bridges across campus, and will help add resources for more success down the road. All of these efforts should create an environment in which success is the norm, and your value to the institution is without question.