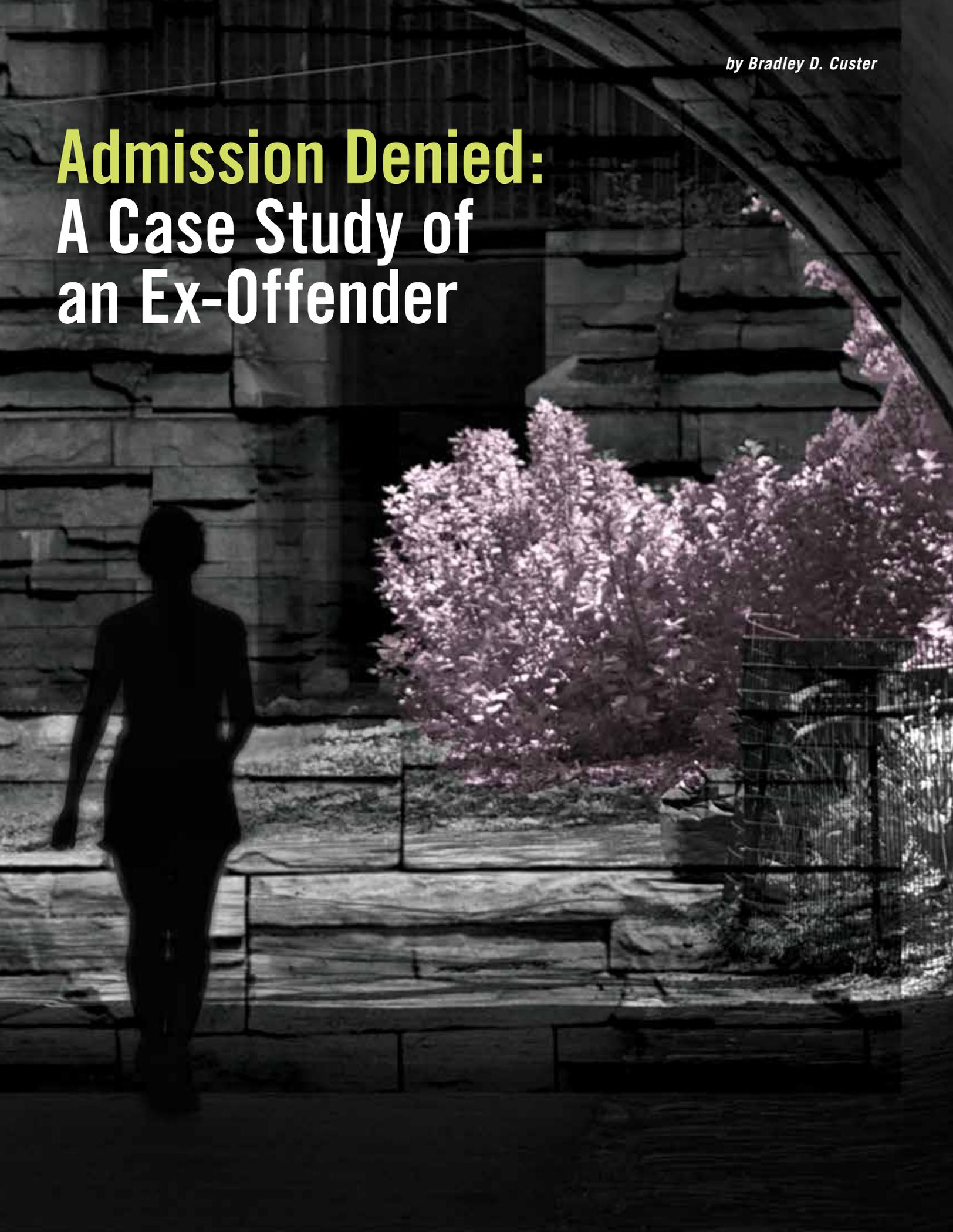


*by Bradley D. Custer*

# **Admission Denied:** **A Case Study of** **an Ex-Offender**





## Introduction

As human services professionals, we in higher education value helping people and often get personally invested in their stories. The people we serve, primarily students, face challenges in applying and paying for college, completing coursework and degrees, and finding employment after graduation. Along the way, college administrators strive to provide support through policy-driven programs and services. However, the special admission policy for students with felony convictions may be contradictory to the philosophy of higher education (Custer, 2013). Upon investigation, what I observed raised more questions than answers, and the essence of my confusion springs from a single college applicant's story. This article, a case study at one institution, is meant to spark reflection about the way admission offices treat the students who may need higher education the most: ex-offenders.

The setting for the study was a public research university in the Midwest where administrators in enrollment services and student affairs reviewed the criminal history of all undergraduate (and later graduate) applicants, admitting only those whose criminal histories did not indicate a threat to the campus. All applicants submitted admission essays that explained the details of their criminal incidents and legal outcomes, which were reviewed by the committee of administrators. As a researcher, I gained access to 54 redacted applicant files that I studied to learn about the applicants' collective experience in the special admission process (Custer, 2013). One applicant, who I will call "Susan," had a particularly difficult experience with this process and ultimately withdrew her application. Her story, as documented in the case file, is presented here as an opportunity for critical discussion.

## Susan's Case

Susan, an African-American woman, was 38 years old at the time of her application. She completed her GED in 1990 and attended

a community college from 2002 to 2008, where she earned more than 70 credit hours and a 1.978 GPA. The available documents were unclear about whether she completed a degree or certificate program, but they verified that she took primarily business courses.

Prior to her enrollment at the community college, Susan was arrested in September 1998 and was later convicted in January 1999 of aggravated assault, a second-degree felony. She was again arrested in December 1998 and was later convicted in March 1999 of theft, a fifth degree felony. Her sentences combined, she was ordered to pay restitution (amount unknown), to be under community control (probation) for five years, and to pay court costs of \$350. Her probation was terminated early just over a year later in April 2000. This information came from public court records collected by university administrators.

In 2010, 10 years after her release from probation, Susan applied for admission at the university where she intended to major in what she

called “business/social services.” She was met with a requirement to disclose her felony conviction, and she did. She also completed the essay, briefly describing why she wanted to attend the university. Later, university administrators contacted her for more detailed information. She responded with the following unedited written statement:

Hi,  
I apologize for the delay, I just dont quite understand what more it is your department wishes for me to explain about a situation that happened over a DECADE ago. Considering the fact that you guys want to rejudge me for something I never even spent a day in jail for, I completed my prohbation, paid my restitution and was even released from prohbation early for completing my requirements before my due date, not to mention I feel that it's personal since it involves me and my sons deceased father. (NO, I DID NOT CAUSE OR HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH HIS DEATH!) That's a chapter of my life I have moved beyond, thanks to GOD AND THERAPY! I live a Christian life, am a responsible parent, and live for helping all those that I can. I STRIVE to better myself of that I can continue being a productive individual in the society we live in today. It has not only disheartened me, but it has made me understand that it will always be individuals, institutions, jobs, and in this case, [the university], that will always make it harder for the disadvantage to live productive and meaningful lives. I can't say I understand but life is what you make it! I will continue to do all I can to succeed in life, despite mistakes that I made while living my not so perfect life. This too is an obstacle I will overcome, because I know there is something GREATER in store for me. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
“Susan”

*The most important question I pose is was this process worthwhile? Did the university protect itself from a dangerous criminal by denying admission to Susan? Or is this process more harmful to the applicants than it is beneficial to the university? Reducing violence on college campuses is a high priority, but will this process achieve that goal?*

#### Why Denied? Critical Discussion

Susan never made it through the admission process at the university because she never addressed the details of her felony conviction in her statements. According to the notes in her file,

an administrator spoke to her on the phone after receiving her second statement. The note read, “Spoke with applicant. Will not provide any more info and will look to go to another school.” Her application was considered incomplete, and she was essentially denied admission.

To evaluate the issues raised from Susan’s story, let us first return to her statement. She wrote that the university sought to “rejudge” her. Should the university have the authority to reapply a court’s ruling to impose additional sanctions, such as denying admission or applying conditions of admission? If applicants are determined to be academically qualified and if they are deemed not to be a direct threat, should they not gain full access to any public institution? Ex-offenders coexist freely among us in shopping malls, public parks, grocery stores, and more, so why should we fear their behavior more on college campuses?

In her first sentence, Susan expressed confusion about what and why the university needed to know about her conviction because it happened more than 10 years ago. The university’s policies did not limit the review of criminal history to any time period, but why was the university concerned about convictions older than 10 years? Did the university believe that a person could still be an imminent threat to the campus community based on two convictions from 10 years ago? The probability of criminal recidivism is shown to decline over time, which in Susan’s case was clear because of her otherwise clean record (Blumstein and Nakamura 2009).

Susan’s story also raised questions about exactly what institutions should be examining. While her aggravated assault charge might be cause for review, is her theft charge concerning? Should all charges warrant review? How do administrators know which con-

victions are realistically predicative of future dangerous behavior? Weissman, et al. (2007) found that less than half of colleges surveyed trained their admission review committees on interpreting criminal history information.

Susan expressed a feeling of her character being improperly judged due to her criminal history. She reported being “disheartened” by “individuals, institutions, jobs,” and people at the university who continued to make it harder for the disadvantaged to “live productive and meaningful lives.” Her perspective on the difficulty of finding jobs, earning trust, and gaining access to higher education is familiar to many ex-offenders. College student ex-offenders are known to face significant stigma (Copenhaver, et al. 2007).

The most important question I pose is was this process worthwhile? Did the university protect itself from a dangerous criminal by denying admission to Susan? Or is this process more harmful to the applicants than it is beneficial to the university? Reducing violence on college campuses is a high priority, but will this process achieve that goal?

### Summary

No additional information was available to indicate what happened to Susan. Perhaps she applied to another college; perhaps she gave up on higher education. The philosophical questions raised here are largely unanswered, and the few studies available that examined special admission practices indicated uncertainty about their worth in improving campus safety (Custer, 2013; Olszewska 2007; Weissman et al. 2010). I challenge admission and student affairs practitioners to reconsider this process because ex-offenders need higher education, because this process does not likely make campuses safer, and because people like Susan deserve to be treated better.



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# The Counselor's Corner

To help clear up the confusion surrounding college rankings, NACAC has compiled a number of helpful resources students can use to correctly rank their own college lists. The information on this site is a kind of “Cliff Notes” to the rankings published annually by companies like *U.S. News & World Report*, *Forbes* and many other private companies. The information here will help students read between the lines and use the rankings to their advantage.

[www.nacacnet.org/collegerankings](http://www.nacacnet.org/collegerankings)

Have a question about the rankings?  
Ask our rankings expert, Joe Prieto.

