


# FEELING THE BURN



New college admission officers face many challenges in the first few years on the job. It's not uncommon for burnout to occur early in an admission career, and some may leave the profession. Here is what is important to know about preventing burnout and advancing on the admission career ladder.

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By Elaina Loveland

College admission has always been a rewarding and at times, stressful, career path.

“On a daily basis I think to myself how crazy it is that I can make or break a prospective student’s dream,” said Heather Riley, assistant director of admissions at Kentucky Wesleyan College in Owensboro, Kentucky.

For professionals new to the field, an increased competitiveness in college admission and advances in technology in the last decade or so have contributed to an even greater possibility of burnout early in the career. While it is not new that admission officers sometimes leave the field after a few years, the added pressures make young professionals especially vulnerable and it is even more important today to mentor admission officers to build their careers.

The first year of an admission career can be isolating and overwhelming. There is a lot of travel in addition to administrative duties. Students nowadays expect immediate responsiveness. There is a fast learning curve during which admission officers should be prepared to answer all kinds of questions from prospective students and parents.

“You’re expected to be an expert on many things right from the start,” explained Diane Soboski, associate director of admissions at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. “New counselors are routinely asked to field questions on academic programs, campus culture, admission statistics, national trends, and admission decision projections.”

Figuring out decisions, especially when a new admission professional is on the road, can also be stressful.

“Often younger professionals struggle with finding the balance of when to take initiative to make decisions on their own and when to go to others for advice and guidance,” noted Soboski.

Different from past pressures of the job is that some new admission officers “mention feeling pressure to enroll students from their territory,” according to Michael Sass, assistant director of admission at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.

“The pressures of competition and focus on cost and ROI have made the environment more results-oriented and more data-driven, but it has not taken away the focus on most admission offices on advising and counseling prospective students through their college search,” said Sass.

### GRATITUDE GOES A LONG WAY

“As a young admissions officer, you can feel both incredibly undervalued by the institution as a whole and incredibly pressured to recruit and yield a class—the paradox of some of the lowest-paid employees at the institution being responsible for the legwork of recruiting for tuition-driven institutions can be downright frustrating,” explained Eric Ahlstrand, senior assistant director of admissions at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. “So offering flexibility, singing praise when it is warranted, and letting professional interests guide future opportunities can go a long way.”

Many experienced admission officers agree that younger colleagues need encouragement and appreciation.

“I believe that a lot of what is missing from our profession is gratitude. The monotony of travel season is when we often forget why we do what we do—standing behind the same table spewing the same information for months straight makes us all grow weary. It is truly a small gesture, but a word of encouragement, reassurance, or token of thanks can truly go a long

### HOW TO ADVANCE IN A CAREER IN ADMISSION



- Get involved with state, regional, or national organizations.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions of supervisors, colleagues, and other professionals in the field.
- Build a diverse professional community—both inside and outside of your institution.
- Seek a mentor.
- Advocate for yourself—diversify your portfolio when possible and learn as many aspects of the field as you can.
- Figure out work-life balance—even during recruiting season.

way for a new professional feeling disconnected and disengaged from the campus community,” said Riley.

Taking time to acknowledge accomplishments of newer admission professionals—even for small tasks—can help create a sense of belonging and camaraderie with the rest of the admission team. When times get tough, feeling that appreciation can help prevent or mitigate effects of burnout.

### TAKING THE LONG VIEW

It’s common for new professionals to think short-term because if working in admission is their first job after college, the longest period they have often thought of their future was in a four-year block (the time it takes to finish high school or an undergraduate degree).

It takes time to fully understand the new job as a college admission officer.

“I often share that the first year as an admission officer happens to you—it really takes a full cycle to understand the job and you’re along for the ride faking it until you make it,” said Ahlstrand.

Sometimes, the amount of travel in the first several years in admission can be a factor in career burnout. Being on the road recruiting for many weeks can cause some stress, but there is an upside to all of that travel that many new admission professionals don’t realize.

“The travel can create a new community of colleagues while out on the road, and the travel diminishes with time, so if you can stick with it long enough to become a dean or director the travel can ease and the relationships can last with colleagues in the field,” said Sass. “It simply takes the ability to see the long view, to see the bigger picture and determine what a life in the field can become, rather than just what it is now.”

### MENTORSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“Not many people grow up wanting to be a college admission professional,” noted Rex Oliver, associate director of recruitment at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. “That’s why it is so important to develop and mentor young professionals in our field because you never know who will go on to be a future director of vice president of enrollment management.”

Many experienced admission officers say that a mentor has been crucial in their career development, and they feel that they should pay back the favor by becoming a mentor themselves.

Beyond participating in professional development opportunities, building a network for support is invaluable for young admission professionals. Sometimes, more experienced admission staff make it their personal mission to help their staff create their own networking community.



“Mentoring these young professionals and helping them to see the larger picture of the work that we do is crucial to their longevity in the field,” said Soboski.

Part of being a good mentor is making professional development for new admission officers a priority from the beginning of their careers.

“Introducing young counselors to the larger, broader field from the beginning, through professional development, conferences, etc., will give them a connection that goes beyond their office. In turn, this should result in less burnout and turnover,” said Riley.

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“When it comes to my staff, I, as a supervisor, very intentionally try to connect my staff with other leaders in my office and in the field so they can learn from a variety of excellent professionals and not simply from me,” explained Sass. “This takes an element of humility, I have to admit I cannot be all that they need to grow and develop in the field, but it is important for me, my team, my institution, and the field that I place their growth ahead of

my own ego and connect them with other colleagues even when it may mean they could leave my office for a different position at another institution.”

#### **DECIDING TO STAY?**

After a few years in admission, many professionals evaluate if they will stick to a career in college admission for the long haul, or if they suffer from burnout, some may leave the field, or decide to switch to a similar career.

Oftentimes, the first job for a new college admission office is at their alma mater, where they have to make the transition from being a student to recruiting for that institution.

“I received the most important advice along these lines from my first supervisor: When your experience here as an employee starts negatively impacting your perception of the four years you had here as a student, it’s time to move on,” explained Ahlstrand. “For some, that means leaving the profession; for others, that means taking the next step in a career.”

Admission officers might decide to move up the ranks at another institution, leave the field, or make a career change. One common move is to switch to the other side of the desk and work at a high school as a college counselor.

“It’s all about what drives you in the field—if the relationships with students is your primary motivation, there are college counseling offices across the country that need you, but if you are refreshed by the cycle and challenge of a new class each fall, stay right where you are,” advised Ahlstrand.

But any career move should not be taken lightly, and it should not be just as a result of career burnout.

“I have met colleagues who switched onto the high school side to find more stability in their work only to find they do not like the role as much, and colleagues who have left admission for other areas of higher education to find they miss the nature of admission work,” said Sass.

Reginald Miles, associate director of national recruitment at the University of Arizona, is one such example. After a few years in admission, he left for a couple of years and worked in academic advising. But he found he missed admission and returned the field.

Also, Miles learned to create his own opportunities for professional fulfillment in his latest admission role.

“As you move up the ladder in admission and in enrollment management, you really lose contact with the students because you are doing high-level things,” explained Miles.

When Miles began to feel disconnected, he created his own solution. After a month into his job as an associate director of admission at Arizona, he asked his supervisor if he could have one territory of his own—and his supervisor approved.

“Even though I am a manager for my team, I understand the questions that my recruiters are being asked because I am in the field as well,” noted Miles.

### **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

Although admission officers new to the field are still learning the ropes, they still can contribute to the future of the profession.

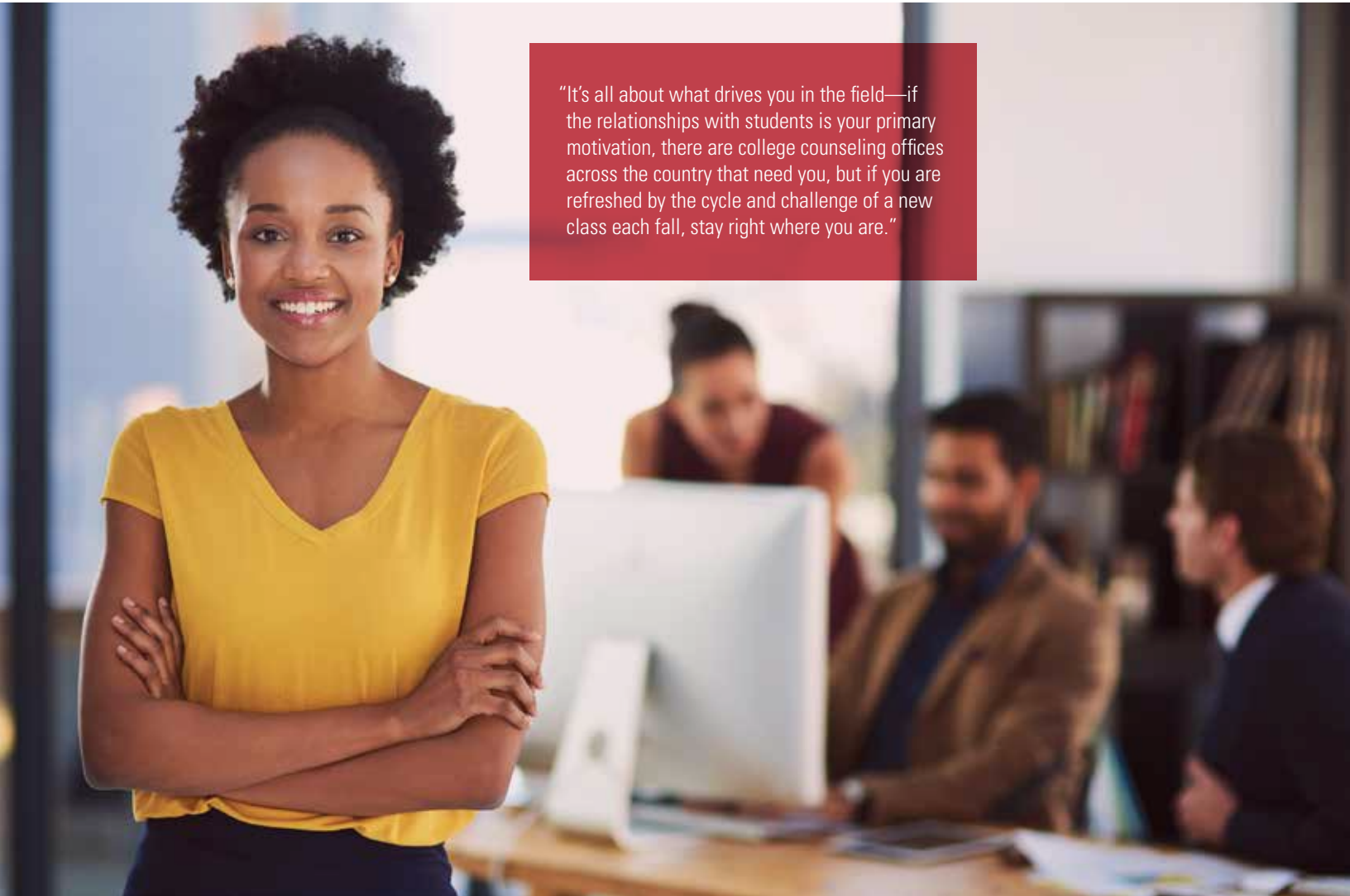
“I have learned so much from my involvement with young professionals and believe the blending of tradition and innovation is paramount to ensuring the success of our profession in the future,” said Soboski.

Involving younger staff in higher level conversations is a mutually beneficial strategy.

“Working on team-based projects that include staff members from various levels of experience can really add to the breadth and scope of ideas presented,” she said. “Not only is this a great learning opportunity for younger colleagues, but it’s also way to incorporate new ideas and perhaps look at a problem through a lens we haven’t considered in the past.”

Ahlstrand agrees that connecting experienced and less experienced colleagues is vital.

“Not only are young officers the future of the field, but they bring important new ideas for leveraging technology and resources in a way that only a new perspective can,” he said.



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## ALTERNATIVE CAREERS

### **Carmen Johnson, Director of Admissions, North Broward Preparatory School**

Carmen Johnson originally had no intention of leaving college admission. But she got a phone call about her current position, and she decided it was the right move for her.

Johnson spent 11 years in university admission and four years as a college counselor before her current position.

"I find it is very challenging to be a mom and move up the career path in college admission," Johnson explained. "I have two very young children which made it difficult to keep up with the demands in my position."

Johnson had wanted to move up in college admission, but she didn't want to spend more time away from her children.

"But I was not ready to jump back into college counseling because I am very passionate about enrollment management," she said.

Since making the switch to admission at a private school, she still is able to work on helping an institution meet its enrollment goals while having the time needed to spend with her children.

"Admission is admission, meaning the same cycle exists on the college side, as well as the PK-12 side: recruitment, application review, yield, and summer planning," said Johnson. "Our recruitment efforts are all local, which does not require overnight travel over long periods of time. I find that I am still able to make a positive impact in the profession."

### **Emmi Harward, Executive Director, Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools**

Like many college admission officers, Emmi Harward fell into admission after college and worked first for her alma mater. She later worked for five years at another university before switching to college counseling, which she did for 15 years. But her career trajectory was still changing—in January 2017, Harward became the first full-time executive director of the Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools (ACCIS).

"While I loved the field, I needed a bit of a change of pace in order to keep loving it," said Harward.

She said that the professions of admission and college counseling have evolved in the last two decades.

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"When I began in this field over 20 years ago, it felt that up to the point of middle management in admission, the paths of admission officers and college counselors in independent schools were more parallel and the knowledge and skills were more directly applicable in moving from one to the other," Harward explained.

"Now I think that college counselors need more training and support in socio-emotional counseling to help their students, while many admission officers need more of a background in statistics to manage and achieve all of the metrics that college presidents and boards demand. Those paths that felt easy to cross over to me at the time, now feel as if they have diverged quite a bit more, with a greater learning curve for those who leave admission for college counseling, or vice versa. The work on both sides of the desk has changed and grown a bit more specialized," she said.

Harward feels that she is using skills she learned in both admission and college counseling in her current role.

"My actual 'now' is an interesting blend of these two roles because rather than directly counseling and supporting students, I'm supporting their counselors as members of our association," said Harward. "It's something new every day but in a field that I've been working in for over 20 years."

Harward started with ACCIS as a volunteer on a small committee, then chaired that committee, and later led the association as a volunteer. She was then charged with making the case for a full-time executive director and figured out quickly that she wanted the job she was helping to design.

"I realized that I ended up in my current role through volunteering," said Harward. "Through roles small and large in Southern ACAC, Potomac and Chesapeake ACAC, Western ACAC, ACCIS, and on local committees and groups, I was able to develop skills and interests that I didn't have the same opportunities to grow in my full-time job."

Harward credits her participation in professional development throughout her career to leading her toward her current position.

"I don't think I would have had access to many of the opportunities I've had without taking the chance to serve professional associations to build not just my résumé but also my skill set," she said.

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Ahlstrand also suggests inviting younger colleagues to participate in higher-level meetings because it can give newer admission officers a greater sense of purpose in their work.

"Young officers work so much in the weeds—high school visits, individual files, application generation emails, phone calls, conversations, and congratulations—this is all important, but being able to get the view from a higher vantage point can add a sense of purpose and direction to the daily grind," said Ahlstrand.

Incentives can aid the retention of college admission officers and help them avoid burnout.

"College admission as a young professional is like being in a pie-eating contest, but the reward for winning is more pie," explained Ahlstrand. "I don't think it's sustainable to reward reliable officers who produce good work with

more of the same work. A key to retaining officers is to reward them, instead, with new opportunities, compensation, and recognition."

College admission professionals, especially those who stick with it, note that the rewards of the profession are immeasurable.

"We are fortunate in this line of work to see the direct impact we have on those we interact with," said Oliver. "You will never forget the first time you're able to tell a student they're admitted, or that college truly is possible for a student who never thought that it would be." □

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