

Admission, Heal Thyself:

PRESCRIPTION

1. Find ethical common ground.
2. Demystify the admission process.
3. Keep the “mission” in admission.
4. Support each other.
5. Stand up for what we truly believe.



Jim Jump is the director of guidance at St. Christopher's School in Richmond, Virginia and a former admissions officer, coach and philosophy professor at the college level.

A Prescription for Reclaiming College Admission as a Profession

by Jim Jump

Is college admission a business or a profession? This question is timeless because no issue (with possible exception of the perennial debate about whether admission(s) is singular or plural) sparks as much passion among admission practitioners, and it is timely because many of the controversial issues found in college admission today beg the question. The Early Decision issue, at least as it relates to yield manipulation for the purpose of improving rankings, and the movement to redefine financial need as “willingness to pay” are both chapters in the business/profession debate.

The question is incorrect when posed as an either/or formulation. The correct question is whether college admission is a business *and* a profession. That college admission is a business became obvious long ago. Whether admission still qualifies as a profession is open for debate.

The business/profession debate raises fundamental questions, such as whether education is a product or a process, but it is important to stipulate that nothing is wrong with recognizing that college admission is partly a business. Higher education is a major employer in many communities, and even the purists among us might concede that institutional survival is a worthy objective, especially when salary is a consequence. Colleges and universities have a responsibility to be good stewards of the tuition and philanthropic monies they receive, and that requires sound business practices.

The truth is that we couldn't prevent college admission from being a business even if we wanted to. Too much money can be made preying on the anxieties of parents and students with regard to the college process. The test preparation industry is one of the marketing miracles of our time, creating and spreading the myth that an SAT preparation course is a prerequisite for admission to college. Mainstream publications from *USA Today* to *US News & World Report* to *The Wall Street Journal* have discovered a market for information and hype about college admission, and “expert” advice on packaging an applicant to impress admission committees or manipulating the financial-aid system is readily available for the right price.

The rise of the for-profit college admission industry poses a threat to all of us who want admission to remain a profession, justifying the need for its services by calling into question our competence and professionalism. The hidden message is that we can't be trusted because we are looking out for our own interest. Unfortunately, we have contributed to that erosion of trust and the practices causing the greatest erosion are those that most resemble business practices. The manipulation of admission data to improve rankings has much in common with the "creative accounting" companies such as Enron and WorldCom used. At a time when the automotive industry is moving away from dickering for price, financial aid discounting, leveraging, and preferential packaging summon memories of Monty Hall and "Let's Make a Deal." Our failure to agree on reasonable guidelines for Early Decision and Early Action creates an "if you order now" (or is that "if you don't order now") climate usually associated with late-night cable television infomercials.

College admission is partly a business, but is it more than the Sales Department of the Enrollment Management Division of Higher Education, Inc. We certainly aspire to be a profession, but are we? Answering that question requires identifying the characteristics that define professions.

Paul Starr's Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the American medical profession, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (subtitled "The rise of a sovereign profession and the making of a vast industry"), identifies several criteria that distinguish professions. Professions are oriented toward service rather than profit. Professions are self-regulating, guided by standards of good practice and a code of ethics. Professions claim authority based on technical, specialized knowledge.

Starr's definition raises as many questions for college admission as it answers. Does the practice of college admission, whether at the high school or college level, require technical, specialized knowledge? Despite all the discussion about credentialing admission officers and high school counselors through instruments like the National Association for College Admission Counseling's Professional Recognition Opportunities (PRO) program, college admission counseling remains more art than science, and training and professional development are haphazard across the college admission world. Self-regulation based on a code of ethics has been the cornerstone of NACAC since its founding over six decades ago, but issues, such as Early Decision, reveal institutions' increasing willingness to ignore the Statement of Principles of Good Practice when it becomes inconvenient or gets in the way of institutional self-interest. The most troubling question, which is difficult to answer, is whether college admission offices are primarily concerned with serving students or maximizing enrollment and income (the truth is that they hope they can do both).

Unstated, but implicit, in Starr's definition is that those within a given profession share a set of core values that they are willing to "profess,"—core values that reflect ideals. If college admission wants to be a profession, it must stand for something beyond filling the class, increasing selectivity and increasing the average SAT score. To be a profession, we must have a vision of what we stand for and what we want the college admission process to represent.

The most fundamental part of that vision is that college selection is a life-changing decision, not to be made casually. College choice is not a life or death decision, but it is a decision with the power to impact the quality of an individual's life on a daily basis.

Because a college education is an experience and not a product, college selection should be personal. All colleges are not alike, and the goal of the college admission process is the “good fit,” finding an environment that meets the student's unique needs and wants. Therefore, college admission is first and foremost about counseling students to help them understand themselves and seek the right college fit.

Finding the right fit requires a decision based on good information, free of coercion. College marketing efforts should be focused on articulating and distinguishing an institution's mission, culture and personality rather than creating consumer craving by telling prospective students what we think they want to hear.

Finally, the college admission process should be fair and easy to understand. We must cut through the hype and myths associated with the process, and clearly communicate to students and parents the factors that do and do not earn admission. We must make admission decisions based only on criteria relevant to success as a student. We must be able to justify admission preferences—for diversity, for legacy and other connections, and for special talents such as athletic ability—or we must abolish them.

What will it take to reclaim college admission as a profession? That is a tough question, given that commercialism, like kudzu, has always proven difficult to keep in check once it gets a foothold. Focusing on solutions such as abolishing Early Decision and the SAT is easy, but both are likely symptoms rather than the underlying disease. Here are several broad principles we might use to help college admission be more professional and less business-like.



Because a college education is an experience and not a product, college selection should be personal. All colleges are not alike, and the goal of the college admission process is the “good fit,” finding an environment that meets the student's unique needs and wants. Therefore, college admission is first and foremost about counseling students to help them understand themselves and seek the right college fit.

1. Find ethical common ground.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that ethics begins where self-interest ends. If college admission is to be a profession, it must be about more than self-interest. We particularly need dialogue about where the line falls between institutional autonomy and professional standards. At what point should institutions be prevented from pursuing self-interest because of damage to the public interest? The Statement of Principles of Good Practice is a good document, if not a perfect one, but it is not enough. We need to frame discussion around our core values, the ideals we hold for the practice of college admission. If we believe that equity and opportunity are the preeminent values, then perhaps that entails ending practices (such as Early Decision) that work against those already at a disadvantage in the college process. If fairness is the paramount value, we must design a process that is fair even if it impedes our ability to shape a class. We need to find common ground on issues such as Early Decision and the role of financial aid (entitlement or marketing tool) and hope that it is big enough and strong enough for all to stand. If we can't find common ground and regulate our darker impulses, we may find the federal government ready to step into the vacuum and do it for us.

2. Demystify the admission process.

The time has come to remove the veil of secrecy from the selective admission process. The public is deluged with hype and misinformation about the process, and silence from the profession about what really matters feeds those who seek to profiteer from anxious students and parents. If we don't want a process where the packaging is more important than the substance within, we need to state that loud and clear in words and actions. If we don't want admission to be a game, then abolish practices that encourage gamesmanship and if we are hesitant to shed light on the process because we can't defend our practices, maybe we need to change the practices.

3. Keep the "mission" in admission.

The word "admission" derives from Latin roots, translated as "towards the mission." The core of college admission is a college's mission and those of us in the profession are in some sense missionaries, spreading a gospel of empowerment, hope and personal growth through education. "If you're not moving ahead, you're falling behind" is the most insidious idea that pushes college admission toward being a business rather than a profession. The consequence of that world-view is that no college or university is ever satisfied even if it accomplishes its mission. Most of the ills that plague admission today have their origin in the need to "move ahead" by increasing applications, raising the profile and improving rankings. In order to reclaim admission as a profession, we must focus on mission, measuring ourselves solely by whether we are enrolling students who succeed in and benefit from our educational program.

4. Support each other.

College counseling and college admission can both be lonely outposts. The pressures on professionals, on both sides of the desk, have increased exponentially for a number of reasons, especially the attention the media focus on college admission. Professions not only establish standards of good practice for those in the guild, but also serve as a source of support for individual professionals serving on the front lines. College admission offices and secondary schools must maintain trust as the foundation of the professional relationship, and look for ways to support, encourage, and nurture individual colleagues. Through the years I have benefited greatly in my school community as a result of positive comments made by college admission officers to visiting parents and students, and all of us can find ways to let colleagues know how much we value their professionalism.

5. Stand up for what we truly believe.

What drew most of us to the practice of college admission? It surely wasn't the promise of wealth; it was the desire to help young people through a crucial time as they develop into adults. Remaining true to our ideals will enable us to avoid the temptation of seeing college admission as primarily a business and will also help us to be our best selves as admission officers and secondary school counselors.

College admission is a business, but it need not be only a business. It is up to professionals to preserve the values that college admission as a profession has stood for and practiced for most of its existence. Individually, we must resist the pressures to focus on results and appearances, instead of process and substance. As members of a profession, we should draw strength from being part of something larger than ourselves, and we should support our fellow professionals.

We should also stand together to resist the corrupting forces of commercialism and speak, with one voice, about college selection and admission truth. Society hungers for substantive and reliable information about college admission, and those of us who work in the trenches and understand the realities should be providing the information and driving the discussion.

NACAC has a role to play as a professional organization unencumbered by commercial interests. What (other than wealth) is preventing NACAC from publishing a definitive college guidebook that is open about the limitations of guidebooks, or a definitive Web site on how to navigate the college admission process, or a Car Talk clone devoted to college admission?

Thinking about what it means to be a profession is what will cure the ills that plague college admission. We must resist the false notion that a business model is inevitable and focus on our core values and ideals. Only then will we restore college admission to health and reclaim its status as a noble profession.

References

Starr, Paul. 1982. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Thacker, Lloyd. 1999. College Admission: Profession or Industry? *The Journal of College Admission*, 164 (Summer/Fall): 12-19.

