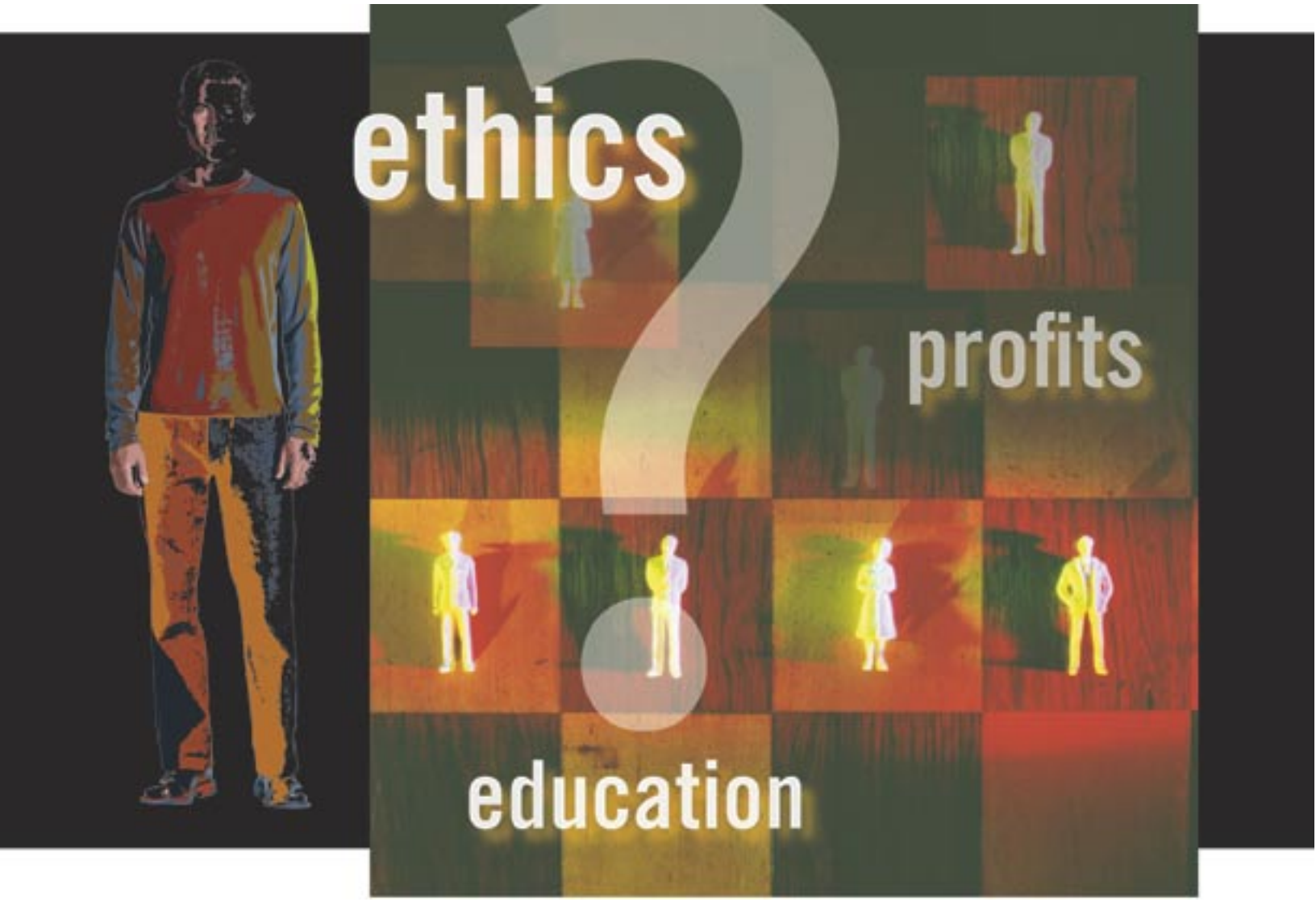


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By Dr. Jean M. Norris

# Pawns or Professionals:

## The 21st Century Admission Counselor

**This past presidential election solidified what is foremost in the minds of Americans today. George W. Bush won, at least in part, because the issue of moral values surpassed concern over the war and the economy, and voters believed he was a "more moral" person (Fineman, Lipper, Wolffe, Meadows and Siderbrand, 2004; Gilgoff and Schulte, 2004; Time, Inc., 2004). This should not come as a surprise as the ethical behavior of leaders has received increased attention in recent years with the fall of major corporations, religious leaders and popular celebrities (American Family Voices, 2003; Brennan, 2002; Crawford, 2003; Johns and Strand, 2000; Kraemer, 2003; Shoichet, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002).**

The higher education sector joins these less-than-prestigious ranks with years of criticism, questions and now numerous claims relative to ethical behavior in recruitment practices. Recent "scandals" involve the for-profit sector including the University of Phoenix (UOP), Career Education Corporation (CEC) and ITT Technical Institute. UOP was "fined 9.8 million by federal regulators who concluded that the organization was so focused on enrollment that it pressured recruiters to accept unqualified students" (Dow Jones & Co., 2004). Similarly ITT Technical Institute was investigated in 1999 and 2003 for alleged fraud in manipulating student enrollment data and other records (Blumenstyk, 2004). Most recently, Career Education Corporation—the world's largest on-campus provider of private, for-profit, postsecondary education—faced allegations of securities law violations. These charges relate to the company's accounting practices and reporting statistics related to enrollments, student population and placement rates (Blumenstyk; Career Education Corporation, 2004a; 2004b). Although findings are still pending from the U.S. Department of Education (Career Education Corporation, 2005), CEC has now been featured twice on *60 Minutes* (Rosen, 2005) where graduates claim they were lied to by admission representatives and former employees' spoke of the pressure they were under to enroll students.

### A Bit of History

In the 1980s, a need for an ethical standard in college recruitment was brought to light after proprietary higher education institutions started recruiting students who qualified for financial aid at welfare offices and began enrolling them in classes. These students were not necessarily ready for college-level work and oftentimes the recruiters were paid a bonus for each enrollment (Borrego, 2001; Burd, 2001).

To rectify this situation, Congress enacted a ban in 1992 on compensating admission counselors according to the number of students they enrolled (Borrego, 2002b; Burd and Curry, 2001). This act had unintended effects and spilled over into the not-for-profit sector, impacting many unsuspecting students (Burd, 2002). For example, William Penn University (IA) and Olivet Nazarene University (IL) were required to pay back a combined total of 8.1 million dollars in federal financial aid for compensating a contractor based on the number of students enrolled.

For-profit colleges aside, consider how the changing, competitive market has many traditional schools facing intense competition. Many not-for-profits have hired enrollment managers to implement sophisticated yield-management techniques geared toward ensuring enrollment goals are met. Tuition discounting and financial aid leveraging strategies are rampant, and considered acceptable methods of recruitment.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), originally established to serve as an advocate of ethical practices in the recruitment of students and awarding of scholarship dollars, now recognizes the ethical dilemmas admission counselors face in the current competitive marketplace. A statement on the NACAC Web site reads, "…increased recruitment

efforts, the introduction of marketing concepts and the trend toward enrollment management have led to the perception, real or imagined, that recruitment and marketing techniques are taking the place of counseling... what counts most today is using any means possible to attract students to meet enrollment and economic targets" (NACAC, n.d.a para. 4).

**Purpose of the Study**

So is history repeating itself? Is the higher education "sales person" to be trusted to ethically balance the needs of the student *and* the organization? Is the competitive environment so intense that individuals are being influenced by the organizational culture rather than their own values? To answer these and other questions, this national study was conducted in May, 2004 to measure the moral judgment (a component of ethical decision making) of admission counselors across the United States. The moral judgment score was then compared to other professions, and between admission counselors working in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. Since age, gender and education-level were also shown to have an impact on moral judgment, these variables were compared as a whole and between the two sectors (Dawson, 2002; Goolsby and Hunt, 1992; Silver and Valentine, 2000; Trevino, 1992; Windsor and Cappel, 1999).

**Theory of Moral Judgment**

Based on the theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, individual's progress through stages in moral development begins with the fear of punishment orientation and peaks with the practice of universal ethical practices (Wotruba, 1993). James Rest further developed this theory and introduced the neo-Kohlbergian approach in 1999. This approach still finds Kohlberg's model and methodology to be useful and largely valid yet modifications are required (Walker, 2002). According to Trevino (1992), the neo-Kohlbergian approach shares Kohlberg's theory of cognition yet does not support the six stages. Kohlberg believed that it was extremely rare for an individual to reach stage six and less than 20 percent of American adults reach the highest stage level of thinking (Rest and Narvaez, 1994; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma, 1999; Trevino, 1992). Instead of Kohlberg's six stages, Rest created a tool to measure three schema: personal interest, maintaining norms and postconventional thinking (Thoma, 2002). He believed that the measurement of tacit knowledge is more worthy as it is the unspoken, expressed knowledge that drives most decisions for most people (Narvaez and Bock, 2002; Puka, 2002; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau, 1999).

**Sample**

The population was comprised of individuals currently employed as admission counselors (or related titles) in a United States, baccalaureate-degree granting, private college or university. Participants for the not-for-profit sample were current members of NACAC as of August, 2003. The for-profit sample consisted of admission counselors employed as of September, 2003, by a proprietary, national university volunteering to represent this segment. Researchers contacted 2,371 individuals to ascertain their interest in the study. Of the 335 who requested to participate, 138 returned their surveys by the deadline, for a return rate of 41 percent equally representative of for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

Respondents were asked to provide their names and telephone numbers if they were willing to participate in a follow up telephone interview. Telephone interviews yielded 11 participants (n=1 for the for-profit sector, and n=10 for the not-for-profit sector). In sum, eight percent, or 11 out of 138 respondents were interviewed by telephone.

**Data Collection Methods**

The most popular and widely-used tool for measuring moral judgment is the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Aquino, 2002; Thoma, 2002; Windsor and Cappel, 1999). The DIT was developed by James Rest in 1974 in response to the lengthy, labor-intensive and subjective method of interviewing used by Lawrence Kohlberg (Walker, 2002).

Research using the DIT numbers well over 400 published articles and books, as well as numerous unpublished works (Nucci, 2002; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, et al.,1999). At least five professions and the general adult population have been studied with this tool. It is estimated that half a million participants have already been involved in research using the DIT (Walker). The tool was in need of updating however and the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2) was developed. The DIT2 was a better instrument as it provides stronger support for validity criteria, purges fewer participants to retain a wider range of overall scores, shortens the test, and has clearer instructions (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, et al.1999; Walker). This was the first study of the admission counseling profession using the DIT or the DIT 2.

Additional qualitative data was collected using semi-structured telephone interviews. The DIT2 was sent with a cover letter asking respondents to send their name and telephone number if they were interested in participating in a short telephone survey.

## Findings

**Demographic Findings**

The mean age of individuals participating in the study was 39 years old (n=125) with a standard deviation of 12.1 (13 respondents did not indicate an age). The gender of the respondents indicates nearly an exact split between males and females. A total of 68 female respondents and 66 male respondents completed the DIT2 (four respondents did not indicate a gender). Specifically 100 of the respondents indicated an educational

level ranging between a professional degree and a masters degree. The remaining 31 respondents were enrolled as a senior in a bachelor's degree program or have completed a baccalaureate degree. Seven respondents did not indicate an education level.

**Moral Judgment Scores**

Findings from the DIT2 show that there were no significant differences in moral judgment score at a .05 level between admission counselors working in for-profit and not-for-profit colleges or universities. Although the sample size from the for-profit sector was small (n=9) compared to the not-for-profit sample (n=129), the return rate was 41 percent and 43 percent respectively. When comparing the total sample with other professions, admission counselors have a higher mean moral judgment score than the general adult population, score higher than some professions/groups, and lower than other professions/groups. Individual comparisons of moral judgment scores of the not-for-profit and for-profit groups to age, gender and education level did not show any significant relationships.

**Telephone Interviews**

Qualitative data collected in the telephone interviews show concern by participants on changes in the admission counseling profession over time. A majority of those interviewed spoke of increased competition and the pressure to meet enrollment goals. Most of the respondents expressed that they did not practice unethical behaviors, but are concerned with others who may. Finally, a majority of those surveyed spoke of a lack of understanding and recognition of the admission counseling profession within their institutions, as well as in general. External relationships with parents, and high school and community college counselors were identified as groups that do not understand the many demands of the admission counseling profession.

**Conclusions**

Within the limitations of this study, certain conclusions can be drawn. Individuals working as admission counselors in for-profit and not-for-profit, baccalaureate-degree granting, private colleges or universities possess a higher level of moral judgment than the general adult population. No relationship exists between admission counselors' moral judgment scores in the for-profit and not-for-profit educational sectors studied and age, gender or education level. Many studies,however, argue that these variables impact moral judgment.

More specifically, studies show a relationship between moral judgment and age as a result of an individual becoming more aware and therefore developing a deeper level of understanding and questioning of moral authority (Dawson, 2002; Goolsby and Hunt, 1992; Silver and Valentine, 2000; Trevino, 1992; Windsor and Cappel, 1999). Alternatively, a study conducted by Al-Shehab (2002) examining age and academic discipline of faculty members, showed no statistically-significant relationship to moral judgment scores when using the DIT. Another study suggests that those making the claim that age has an impact on moral judgment do not always control for education with the age variable (Weeks, Moore, McKinney, and Longenecker, 1999).

Individuals working as admission counselors in for-profit and not-for-profit, baccalaureate-degree granting, private colleges or universities possess a higher level of moral judgment than the general adult population.

This study controlled for confounding factors, and the age variable showed no statistically-significant relationship to moral judgment. This study did not support the findings of a majority of previous research. Perhaps as the first study of the admission counseling profession, the results were specific to this field or the sales profession.

Gender, the second variable, has been studied widely in relation to moral judgment. This study had nearly an exact split between male and female respondents and showed no significant relationship between moral judgment scores and gender. Females had a slightly higher mean moral judgment score than males, but it was not statistically significant. Trevino (1992) and Dawson (2002) have found gender differences with females scoring higher than males on the DIT. The relationships were found to be weak and trivial.

A final variable in this study was educational level. A majority (76.4 percent) of respondents indicated an educational level of a master's degree or a professional degree. The remaining respondents were either seniors in a bachelor's degree program or had earned a bachelor's degree. Seven respondents did not indicate an education level. Studies show support for an increase in moral judgment with formal education since cognition is involved (Goolsby and Hunt, 1992; King and Mayhew, 2002). In fact, even when confounding factors are controlled, the number of years of formal education has been one of the most consistent correlates of cognitive moral development (King and Mayhew, 2002; Trevino, 1992).

This study did not show a relationship between education and moral judgment score, perhaps due to the large number of respondents holding post-baccalaureate degrees. All but seven of the respondents indicated at least some level of higher education. Studies point to other factors besides the variables considered in this study to have a relationship to moral behavior. One such variable is societal influence. According to

Bandura (2002) and Carson (1995/96) even those with high moral standards may need help in ethical decision-making. Individuals are faced with many psychological devices for disengaging moral control and may serve profit over the needs of people (Bandura, 1999). Telephone interviews conducted in this study showed some evidence of this concern. A majority of admission counselors stated that reaching enrollment goals was extremely important while a smaller number indicated pressure from their superiors to make goals.

**Implications and Recommendations**

This study was limited to admission counselors or a related job title at for-profit and not-for-profit, baccalaureate-degree granting colleges and universities in the private sector. The admission counselor job title was selected with the assumption that this position worked most closely with prospective students and/or families in making an enrollment decision. Future studies may want to include measurement of this variable to provide evidence for this assumption.

Public colleges and universities are facing similar competitive challenges and revenue shortfalls from federal and state budget cuts. Comparing the admission counselors working in the public sector to their counterparts in the private sector may offer additional insight into the profession overall.

Several studies using the DIT or DIT2 show evidence of a relationship between moral judgment score and age, gender and education level. This study did not show relationships to any of these variables. As stated, this study represented an equal division of males and females with a mean age of 39 with a great majority of respondents possessing a degree above the bachelor's degree level; however, this profile was not necessarily reflective of the typical admission counselor. It was possible that non-random sample selection had an impact on these results. Perhaps respondents represented only those willing to complete a fairly complicated and time-intensive survey. This study may add to the body of literature in a meaningful way by showing alternative findings and encourage further exploration of this and other professions.

The descriptive research design employed in this study does not intend to address questions of a causal nature (Fink, 2003). In other words, one's moral judgment score does not intend to suggest an individual is more or less ethical. Since moral judgment is only one factor in ethical decision-making, other studies may employ an alternative research design in exploring Rest's Four Component Model, which includes moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character (Cherry and Fraedrich, 2000; Rest and Narvaez, 1994; Windsor and Cappel, 1999; Wotruba, 1993). This study focused on the moral judgment of individuals rather than the organizations at which they are employed. Further research is encouraged to examine societal or organizational influences on ethical behavior including motivational techniques used with admission counselors (Bellizzi, 1995).

The for-profit education sector was represented by a single, national, for-profit university. Findings cannot be generalized to the entire sector given the small and non-representative sample size. Future studies may want to expand this study by including other for-profit providers and utilize random sampling techniques. Similarly, the not-for-profit sample comprised current members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Expanding studies beyond membership in this organization may prove worthwhile for comparative purposes.

Evidence of conflict between the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors may be due to misconceptions related to ethical behavior (Borrego, 2002a). Several organizations do not allow for-profit membership, including the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). In fact, recent efforts to allow for-profit membership to NACAC were voted down in April, 2002 and again in September, 2005 (D. Hawkins, personal communication, May 20, 2003). One reason for this decision was a perception that these institutions have differing ethical standards and goals (D. Hawkins, personal communication, May 21, 2003).

As the first study of its kind, findings are limited within the scope previously outlined. However, this study found no support to indicate differing moral judgment. Admission counselors working in the for-profit sector showed no statistically significant difference in moral judgment scores than their not-for-profit counterparts. Professional organizations can use this study as a means to explore ethics in admission counseling further including examining other components of moral behavior. In fact, in NACAC's 2003–2007 strategic goals, ethics and professional practice are included as areas of focus in the plan (National Association for College Admission Counseling n.d. b).

Perhaps, for those of us working in the education sector, this study can serve as a catalyst for further research. If we gain a greater understanding of ethical behavior in admission counseling and/or the organizations where individuals are employed, we can elevate our service to students and families, begin meaningful discussions amongst admission counselors in all sectors, and increase positive recognition of the admission counseling profession. The perception of unethical behavior by an admission counselor, no matter what sector, has a negative impact on the masses. The admission counselor is critical to student and institutional success. Admission counselors from all sectors (for-profit, not-for-profit, public, private) must band together, learn from one another, and promote the vital role of the admission profession.

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