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Who We Are:

An In-Depth Look at the Educational Backgrounds, Career Paths and Development Needs of Chief Admission Officers and Enrollment Managers

Stop for a moment. Think back to the day you first stepped into an admission or financial aid office in a professional role. What led you to pursue such a career? Were you recruited? Were you simply planning to try out the field for a year or two and lost track of time as years of rewarding work developed into a decade or more? Now think about your educational background. What kind of educational background do you have and to what extent did your field of study adequately prepare you for enrollment management roles and responsibilities? Would you attribute your preparation to something other than your undergraduate or graduate studies? In what areas would you like to further improve your knowledge and skill set?

The University of Southern California (USC) Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, dedicated to research and action that advances the societal benefit of enrollment policies and practices in higher education, sought to shed light on professional preparation, career path and development issues related to chief admission officers and enrollment managers.[1] Literature on these elements for some categories of educational professionals is readily available. For instance, research-based publications exist regarding the preparation of pre-school and early childhood teachers (Lobman et al 2004, Isenberg 2000), educational preparation programs for middle-level teachers (McEwin and Dickinson 1995), the preparation and professional development needs of school principals and superintendents (Grogan and Andrews 2002), and necessary competencies

and attitudes for community college chief academic officers (Townsend and Bassoppo-Moyo 1997).

Additional research explores correlations between various types of preparation and performance, including connections between preparation programs and teaching effectiveness (Reynolds, Ross and Rakow 2002, Lewis et al. 1999), as well as the perceived relevance of graduate programs to the professional preparation of chief student affairs officers (Herdlein 2004). Surprisingly, research literature on career preparation and development issues as they directly relate to chief admission officers and enrollment managers is substantially lacking. Considering the predominance of professional development programs offered through consulting firms and associations,

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[1] Consistent with our larger research agenda, the study from which this article is drawn identifies senior admission officers and enrollment managers as members of a larger group, "enrollment professionals," that includes any institutional member that has a specific and dedicated role in the overall process of recruiting, enrolling, retaining, and graduating students. This article, however, differentiates between chief admission officers and enrollment managers so as to clearly delineate differences among these enrollment professionals where appropriate.

such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), there is certainly a general sense that chief admission officers and enrollment managers have development needs. However, their educational backgrounds and aspirations, reasons for entering the enrollment management field, career paths, perceived preparation for the roles and responsibilities as chief admission officers and enrollment managers, and first-hand insight regarding development needs have remained relatively uncertain or undefined. Altogether, a greater understanding of who we are as enrollment professionals is critical to forging a secure path toward a more informed and capable future.

To this end, we conducted more than 50 semi-structured interviews of one hour each with chief admission officers and enrollment managers from a diverse group of two- and four-year colleges and universities. Interviews took place during early 2009, and the sample spanned the range of public/private designation, Carnegie classification and geographic location. Consistent with the definitions outlined by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) for its annual salary survey of HR professionals, chief admission officers and enrollment managers were identified as follows:

Chief Admission Officer - Responsible for the admission of undergraduates. May also be responsible for recruitment and selection and for the admission of graduate and professional students or for scholarship administration or similar functions.

Chief Enrollment Officer - Responsible for the development of marketing plans for recruitment and retention of students. Also coordinates institutional efforts in admission, financial aid, records and registration, and advising.

Interview volunteers were nearly evenly split among enrollment managers and chief admission officers from institutions with and without enrollment managers. The following findings from these conversations shed light on who we are as enrollment professionals, assess what this means for how we approach our work, and inform efforts to cultivate and support the needs of future professionals.

Education

As a qualitative study, the real value of our research study speaks to the "how" and "why" rather than the "what." The descriptive data regarding the educational credentials of our relatively small group of study participants is still informative and can help to provide context for our analysis. The most frequent undergraduate majors for our group of chief admission officers and enrollment managers were English, History, Psychology, and Business, respectively. Popular master's degrees included Education/Higher Education Administration, College Student Personnel/Counseling and Master's of Business Administration (MBA). Of 19 enrollment managers, all but one had earned a master's degree. All 16 chief admission officers at institutions without enrollment managers had earned a master's degree. However, slightly more than half of the 17 chief admission officers at institutions that also had an enrollment manager on staff had earned a master's degree. This finding appeared consistent with the various role differences found among chief admission officers depending upon whether or not they were at institutions with an enrollment manager. Specifically, chief admission officers at institutions without enrollment managers tended to describe their positions as more autonomous, strategic, political, and data-driven than chief admission officers at institutions with enrollment managers. The latter group described themselves more as functionally-focused operators and personnel managers. As such, it is perhaps not surprising to find that chief admission officers with greater autonomy in the absence of enrollment managers were more credentialed than their counterparts at institutions with enrollment managers.

On the other hand, we unexpectedly found that only a small fraction of our study participants had completed a doctorate; five of the enrollment managers and two of the chief admission officers were at institutions without enrollment managers. A handful of participants professed a lack of interest in doctoral education because they were happy with their current positions. In many cases, they had entered the enrollment management field when doctorates were even less common than they may be today for chief admission officers and enrollment managers and were able to advance to a desirable level based predominately on their professional experience and relationships with colleagues. The vast majority of our study participants openly stated a number of reasons to pursue a doctorate degree; chief

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among these being career advancement. Many participants, especially enrollment managers, affirmed possible presidential aspirations and talked about a doctorate as being required to advance to the most senior level.

Likewise, others described a doctorate as being a "status factor" at their institutions that enhanced their credibility with subordinates. This was identified as important and necessary for enrollment professionals who Alvin Gouldner would likely identify in his infamous 1957 article in the *Administrative Science Quarterly* as "cosmopolitans" that tend to move from one institution to another and need to garner the support of well-established locals. The doctorate is perceived to aid in this effort while also reinforcing one's own confidence which may in turn yield additional support from reporting personnel. On a related note, participants highlighted the important capacity for a doctorate to earn faculty buy-in when crafting a comprehensive institutional enrollment model in which faculty play a central role. A doctorate is thought to communicate a belief in or capacity for research-driven decision making, thereby building trust and generating faculty support. Additional reasons participants stated for earning a doctorate included gaining theoretical and practical knowledge that could directly improve one's effectiveness as a chief admission officer or enrollment manager, and personal gratification.

Despite considerable interest in a terminal degree, study participants reported the existence of a number of barriers toward achieving a doctorate. The most common barrier acknowledged was lack of time due to work and family commitments or a desire to maintain work-life balance. Others stated a lack of access to a nearby doctoral program as a hindrance, especially those who lived and worked in smaller cities that may not be in close proximity to a research institution. Finally, there was a sense that few, if any, doctoral programs provide the knowledge-base

and training necessary for a nuanced field like enrollment management that borrows concepts from a diverse array of social science, business, economic, education, and legal influences.

Entering the Enrollment Management Field

What ultimately led each of these chief admission officers and enrollment managers to pursue a career in the enrollment management field? Most commonly, participants said they were recruited by senior institutional leaders, colleagues or friends who worked in higher education. Those who said they were recruited by senior institutional leaders generally described themselves as being locals who were well-versed in their institution's culture and had strong relationships with institutional leaders. Oftentimes senior leaders reached out to these professionals following enrollment crises or personnel turmoil, wishing for a familiar and trusted face to manage institutional admission or overall enrollment duties, regardless of direct experience. Moreover, many participants developed relationships with admission staff while serving as tour guides and interns as students. Participants who accepted positions in other parts of an institution or in other fields sometimes had a change of heart regarding their career direction as colleagues with whom they had developed professional relationships encouraged them to gravitate toward admission work. Likewise, participants whose friends took admission positions were sometimes persuaded to follow suit. There appeared to be a sense that admission personnel, in particular, successfully market their institutions not only to potential students but in the recruitment of staff.

Though not necessarily recruited to pursue a career in the enrollment management field, about one-quarter of participants said that the connections they made as students ultimately led them to consider and begin careers as enrollment professionals. Some students were involved with student life and planning committees that involved professional staff or were actively engaged

with student organizations overseen by administrators. Others made friends with fellow students who decided to explore careers as admission counselors and, though not necessarily recruiting, would highlight available career opportunities. Still others remained actively involved as alumni, serving to read applications, coordinate regional recruitment events or volunteer in some capacity. Active alumni were also aware of their institution's needs, whether they be financial or human resource-related. At times, this ongoing connection to the institution encouraged former students to return to their alma mater and serve in a more formal capacity. Whether actively recruited or not, relationships with people and institutions were at the heart of many forays into enrollment management.

Less frequently mentioned, though of interest, was career uncertainty as a reason to enter the enrollment management field. A handful of chief admission officers and enrollment managers described unsuccessful efforts to pursue jobs directly related to their fields of study. In some instances, a lack of available jobs in certain fields required participants to reset their career interests and explore new paths, such as those revealed through personal and professional connections. Others had more fanciful career goals that simply never materialized, thereby necessitating a similar exploration process.

Building Careers as Admission and Enrollment Professionals

Interview data from this study revealed a number of ways chief admission officers and enrollment managers build careers in enrollment-related units. This was most notable for the enrollment managers interviewed. Participants described having served in a variety of areas, including admission, financial aid, research, registrar, and student affairs offices, at a range of both public and private institutions throughout the country. The career paths for some professionals were narrower than for others, in some cases intentionally and unintentionally unfolding within a certain type of institution based on its Carnegie classification or religious affiliation. Others, however, were open to pursuing opportunities wherever they arose to gain experience and broaden their knowledge base and levels of responsibility.

Conversely, though to a slightly lesser extent, a number of participants appeared to embrace a more localized approach to career advancement. Rather than build a career track that is predicated on progressing through the ranks while serving as a free-agent of sorts, these chief admission officers and enrollment managers established their career identities within specific institutions and parlayed their distinctive understanding of institutional culture, people and processes into accomplished careers. Evidence from this study suggests that many chief admission officers and enrollment managers may initially draw upon an understanding of their alma mater's culture and the strong relationships they have established there to begin their careers as enrollment professionals; for instance, 18 of the 33 chief admission officers interviewed took their first positions as admission officers at their undergraduate alma mater. They essentially began their careers at institutions where they

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the field. Chief among these, and consistent with Gouldner's perspectives highlighted earlier in this article, are what we would identify as a cosmopolitan approach and a local approach to career advancement.

Just as Gouldner conceived of cosmopolitans as free-floating professionals tethered less to institutions than to their professional field, many chief admission officers and enrollment managers in our study bounced back and forth between institutions in had first-hand knowledge of the student experience that could uniquely position them to recruit and enroll students. Seven of the chief admission officers and six of the enrollment managers interviewed still work at their alma mater, having used their knowledge and relationships specific to the local environment to maneuver the system and advance their careers. Of interest, one reason chief admission officers and enrollment managers may subscribe to a local approach to career advancement may be to emphasize the value of knowledge and experience in place

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of academic credentials; a small but noteworthy group of participants drew attention to the idea that a strong local presence had helped them overcome disparities in qualifications and credentials over the course of their careers.

Although the cosmopolitan and local approaches to career advancement were far and away the chosen paths for the majority of chief admission officers and enrollment managers interviewed, participants highlighted a small set of additional strategies. Among these was a relational approach to career advancement, whereby a professional would attach themselves to a high-ranking administrator and follow that administrator to a number of schools, gradually increasing their own stature and level of responsibility in the process. Another strategy introduced was a network approach to advancement such that an enrollment professional may first work for an external agency (a professional association, government entity or vendor) that interacts with colleges and universities and utilize these relationships to build a career through member institutions. Finally, as was previously noted, some enrollment professionals described being recruited by trusting senior leaders to fill an institutional need or having experienced structural changes within their institutions that lead them to shift away from their roles as registrars and institutional researchers, for example, to serve as chief admission officers and/or enrollment managers. Though these changes are sometimes meant to be temporary, evidence suggests they may have lasting implications for the career paths of these professionals.

Preparation
Despite participants half-jokingly declaring that no one can be prepared for work as chief admission officers and enrollment managers, participants most frequently attributed their preparation to education and experience. Not surprisingly, finance, economics and MBA degrees were viewed as key contributors to one's understanding of relevant business principles, as well as one's capacity to manage personnel,

adapt to organizational change, budget and interpret financial and statistical data. However, liberal arts degrees, held by the majority of chief admission officers and enrollment managers interviewed for this study, were also hailed for having developed analytical, decision-making, strategic thinking, and communication skills seen as necessary for service as chief admission officers and enrollment managers. On another note, doctoral degrees, though held by only a fraction of the chief admission officers and enrollment managers interviewed, were generally praised as a worthwhile achievement based on their perceived efficacy as it pertains to: helping chief admission officers and enrollment managers understand the complex institutional environment; sharing best practices as they relate to recruitment, affordability and retention issues for enrollment managers in particular; and offering opportunities to discuss challenges and learn from colleagues in the classroom. Worth mentioning, aside from highlighting MBA degrees, participants infrequently drew attention to master's programs in particular as having served as a key preparatory aide.

Hands-on experience was also widely considered to be crucial to professional preparation in the enrollment management field. Though one's education is important for all of the reasons mentioned, on-the-job training was even more frequently mentioned as having prepared chief admission officers and enrollment managers to serve effectively in their roles. Enrollment managers specifically cited early work at "established enrollment management shops" as having informed their understanding of how to structure and direct a successful enrollment system. Working within an institution that strategically coordinates a variety of individual units using a holistic approach to enrollment management was identified as important for one's preparation. Likewise, institutional environments that allow professionals to "wear many hats" by gaining experience in numerous sectors of an enrollment system, including those related to recruitment, student aid, institutional research, and marketing, were credited as being valuable to the preparation and development of enrollment managers.

Furthermore, chief admission officers and enrollment managers cited mentors, involvement with professional associations, and personal attributes as essential factors for preparation. Regardless of whether mentors are local or national, participants recurrently underlined the critical value of their guidance and insight in their own development as chief admission officers and enrollment managers. Some of these mentor relationships are established within professional associations such as the NACAC, AACRAO and the College Board and ACT, Inc., as well as within state consortiums that bring together representatives from public institutions to review and address collective admission and enrollment issues. In addition to serving as mentoring and networking conduits, professional associations were also praised for educating enrollment managers regarding emerging enrollment trends and for sharing practical strategies for improving one's enrollment processes. Finally, though to a much lesser extent, personal attributes such as one's level of curiosity, motivation and work ethic were noted as a necessary preparation component.

Interestingly enough, enrollment managers, who commonly oversee a large set of units and considerable staff, most often described themselves as not being prepared for the personnel issues that accompany such a role. More specifically, many enrollment managers did not feel adequately prepared to address political situations that emerged with staff and among

themselves responsible for the strategic directions of student aid departments, registrars, institutional researchers, and even athletics and graduate admission units in certain cases. The breadth of knowledge required to serve in such a role was often initially lacking, sometimes leading newfound enrollment managers to hire paid consultants for assistance. Of note, budgeting, statistical modeling and marketing skills were also frequently mentioned as areas of responsibility for which enrollment managers were not commonly prepared at the outset.

Future Professional Development Needs

The increased complexity of the rapidly changing higher education landscape requires that chief admission officers and enrollment managers, especially those in a strategic role, be well-versed in a variety of ways. As such, our interviewees cited a number of areas they believe need to be at the heart of future professional development opportunities. They generally center on improving the political skill set for these professionals so as to put them in a better position to resource their units, operate more capably within committee structures, develop more productive relationships with faculty, and enhance their abilities as personnel managers.

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units, nor ready for the extensive number of management issues. Such issues were compounded when enrollment managers found themselves attempting to serve as change agents in entrenched environments.

Further, enrollment managers expressed a lack of familiarity with some of the various units that operate in a comprehensive enrollment system. As indicated earlier, many enrollment managers interviewed for this study entered the field through the admission sector. When these admission officers assumed positions as heads of all enrollment units, they suddenly found

enrollment function can be integrated more effectively. They further stated a desire to have a better sense of the bigger picture. Enrollment managers aspire to identify external factors that may impact institutional enrollments and want to know how to respond to and pro-actively address these issues. Knowledge of government regulations, especially as they pertain to student aid, was a stated desire and likely falls under this category as well. Additional topics suggested for future professional development opportunities included issues related to marketing and communications, specifically the use of the Web and social networking, as well as learning data-driven methods for assessing a return on an institution's marketing investments.

Value and affordability issues, institution-wide budgeting, and modeling techniques were also commonly referenced as areas in need of attention by enrollment managers.

Closing Thoughts

Our data cause us to wonder if a lack of relevant degree offerings and credentials are impediments to the ability of senior admission officers and enrollment managers to serve or serve well in their strategic roles. Most enrollment managers had achieved at least a master's degree, but only five had acquired a doctorate. Meanwhile, all 16 chief admission officers at institutions where no enrollment manager exists had achieved a master's degree, but slightly more than half of the 17 chief admission officers at schools where an enrollment manager was present had advanced degrees. In our sample, enrollment managers cited the need for further and more relevant doctoral opportunities, chief admission officers with master's degrees tended to have more strategic roles on campus and chief admission officers without advanced degrees held roles that were predominantly operational. Specifically, respondents felt they lacked preparation for strategic decision-making, institutional politics, working with a broad array of institutional players, and the practical realities of personnel management. Moreover, respondents noted they lacked opportunities to analyze and understand their institutions and their roles within the larger realms of higher education and American society.

Of equal concern, and perhaps related to the perceived lack of formal educational avenues, is the way in which our respondents described their entry into the enrollment management field. Serendipity is the word that best captures the wide array of reasons, motivations and connections that led our respondents to their careers. Familiarity or previous work within the college context seems to be the only common thread. It seems to us that the critical need to manage enrollments well and responsibly in the current era calls for more effective means of bringing people into the enrollment management field and providing them with the knowledge and skills that they need to be successful on behalf of the students and institutions they serve.

In sum, our research suggests that not enough is being done to make it possible for chief admission officers and enrollment managers to earn advanced degrees. Furthermore, there is a need for better methods of identifying and preparing new practitioners and future leaders. For our part, the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice will continue to provide conferences and symposia, examine the efficacy of online and other formal educational options, provide numerous online resources, and maintain research endeavors that collectively promote a better informed, more effective and socially responsible overarching practice of enrollment management.

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