

# Ethical Considerations in College Admission Practices: A Proposal for Dialogic Involvement



## The Problem

A seventeen-year-old high school student arrives home from school in the early fall of her senior year to find her mother staggering in from the mail box under another load of college information. A first box in her bedroom is already filled with view books, catalogues, pamphlets, and brochures from colleges and universities across the country and a second one has been started. A bright student, she has taken a strong college preparatory program, maintained good grades and done quite well on the standardized college placement tests. She is, for many college and university admission offices, what is known as a prime prospect.

The rest of the student's senior year will be filled with interview days, college visitations, college nights, financial aid workshops, and so on, as she attempts to make her college choice. It is her ability to make an informed, rational choice that is the focus when considering the role of ethics and standards in college admission and recruitment practices. In an era of enrollment declines and reductions in state and federal support, higher education is a buyer's market and the competition for students (and, in some cases, for survival) is the fiercest in recent memory. As a result, the task of the admission office in many institutions is to sell space in the institution and make quotas while still enrolling a fair share of the top-notch applicants. As Kip Howard (1987) put it in an article on the emergence of the admission profession: Students are a commodity in short supply for many institutions (22).

There has nearly always been some discussion of ethical considerations in the processes of higher education. However, the current surge in promotional activities has called into question the social responsibility of colleges and universities. The discussion is now focused directly on admission and promotional practices. Mark Patin, director for the Center of Ethics and professor of management at Arizona State University, frames the concern in a paternalistic way:

From the viewpoint of American society, the college or university is almost a sacred institution... Yet, it also is a business. The clearest analogy is the newspaper, which functions as a business and also a medium of truth. But I think our responsibilities are

even greater than a newspaper's, because so many of our consumers are kids just out of high school who don't know what they are doing (King 1987: 26).

Ernest Boyer (1987) articulates a similar concern with a less paternalistic bent in the Carnegie Foundation report, *College*, when he suggests, "To be helpful to prospective students, colleges should provide needed information, and above all, tell their stories with integrity and good taste. Most institutions are, we found, ethical in their procedures of recruitment. But we are concerned that increasing marketing may become the means that drive the end" (22).

## Examples of Current Practice

In order to get at the ethical issues involved, it is necessary to explore current practices.<sup>1</sup> To do so, let's return to our seventeen-year-old high school student.

On a visit to a college fair at an area conference center (college fairs sponsored by high schools or information receptions sponsored by individual colleges and universities would fit this scenario as well), the student and a friend go from booth to booth collecting materials and talking with admission representatives. Generally these representatives or admission counselors are employees of the institution they represent. However, in a few instances, they are alumni representatives volunteering to cover the college fair and to disseminate materials. At the booth of one private liberal arts college, the student learns of an engineering program that would allow her to spend her first few years experiencing the benefits of a small private college before transferring to the larger university's prestigious program to complete her degree. The brochure and the representative imply there is a cooperative relationship between the two schools, so acceptance into the university's program is practically guaranteed if the student transfers from this particular college. Impressed by the representative's description of small class size and attentive professors, the student fills out a card for further information.

At another booth, the student speaks with an alumni representative from a large state university. The representative notices one of the other brochures the student is carrying and informs her that the institution portrayed is really second rate—few faculty members publish, their athletic facilities are not the greatest, and some of their programs are weak. The representative then goes on to explain the attributes of his university in comparison. The student asks a few questions, picks up some brochures and moves on.

The next college the student inquires about is a medium-sized private institution in a smaller town, about an hour from a major city. After some basic inquiries into programs and academic requirements, the student asks about campus social life, and she and the representative talk at length about campus events and the campus' accessibility to the city. The student is impressed with the counselor's description of the amount of freedom the school allows its students, as well as the variety of activities. She makes further inquiries to make sure the school offers programs of study she's interested in and then takes an application as well as the college's view book.

In the weeks following the college fair, the student explores each of the three schools as potential choices. To her dismay, she learns from a student during a visit to the first institution that a transfer between the small private college and the university is not guaranteed. Rather, a student must participate in a very competitive application process with students already in the university as well as those without. Unfortunately, those within are generally more qualified because they've already had some of the necessary coursework. This particular student bitterly explains that he found out too late, had to change his major and is thinking of transferring somewhere else. In her visit to the university, things were pretty much as the alumni representative had described them. However, in talking to a friend who had visited the other school which the university's representative had described as second-rate, the student learned that the school in question had a superb music program, a beautiful campus, experimental learning programs, and an outstanding reputation for quality of teaching.

Finally in a visit to the third school, the student discovered that while there were many campus activities offered, there was a very strict lifestyle code which included such rules as no inter-visitation (between males and females) in the dorms, mandatory sign-out sheets, and curfews. Feeling misled and confused, the student contemplated making her decision on the basis of the financial aid package offered by each institution.

The above scenario is not meant to imply that this is every student's experience, that all college admission representatives distort information; or even, that communication necessarily entails some level of misunderstanding. Rather, I use it to focus attention on what may be an inherent ethical dilemma in a profession where the main goal is persuasion and the tool, information—namely misrepresentation. Roland King (1987), in his article "Painting the Wrong Picture," describes misrepresentation as so filled with shades of gray, that it's hard to decide what's ethical and what's not (26). He cites two reasons why this is so: 1) ethical standards change over time and, 2) there are varying degrees of unethical behavior. He writes: "Most people I interviewed for this article felt that while blatant deceit is rare, 'massaging the facts' is part of the job" (27). In the same article, Michael Hooker, chancellor for the University of Maryland Baltimore County, is quoted as follows: "It would be nice if everybody in the world were more honest. The truth is, though, that we aren't" (27).

In terms of effects, while the deceptions or misrepresentations in the scenario above were discovered before a choice was made, that is not always the case. One example of this is the recent emergence of financial aid games which include such things as the bait-and-switch tactic. This tactic promises the prospective student a big four-year scholarship, but the student is not notified until after he or she enrolls that the scholarship is substantially reduced in the sophomore year. Another tactic is the practice of waiting until the student has received his or her financial aid package from another institution and then offering a package that is slightly larger. Both of these would seem clearly manipulative, so much so that they may be said to eliminate the possibility for informed choice on the part of the student. While the bait-and-switch tactic may yield ill feelings toward the university and

result in a poor retention rate, the bargaining approach, many critics argue, prompts the student to make choices based on the "wrong" reasons. Thus the bargaining approach is subtly more manipulative and more long term in its effects. One such consequence may be the increasing sophistication of students and parents as active players in financial aid games. Parents and students become consumers out to "get the best deal," with little sense of the product, mostly concerned instead with how it is produced (at least according to *U.S. News and World Report* or other such ranking schemes).

In addition to these more obvious effects, there is the problem of decreased credibility across the board for admission personnel and materials. As Ernest Boyer (1987) argues, "Even if only a few colleges are careless about facts and make exaggerated claims, parents and students will begin to hold all colleges in low regard" (22). Already, students are skeptical of college publications as seen in the comments made by students participating in the Carnegie study: "I came to realize (that college letters were) mostly form letters...Colleges never tell you about the bad things...Brochures are dishonest" (15). Yet the positive response of these same students to face-to-face encounters and phone calls indicates the extent to which misrepresentation may still occur. Boyer cites the following ad which appeared in the classified section of the *New York Times* as another indication of the potential for abuse: "Wanted: an exp'd person for ADMISSIONS OFFICE. Must have good speaking voice, telephone skills, and ability to close" (22).

## Self Regulation, Counseling, and the Role of Marketing

It was a concern regarding such abuses, especially in financial aid and scholarship practices that prompted admission professionals to organize ACAC, the Association of College Admission Counselors (now NACAC) as early as 1937. The organization was established "to develop higher standards of practice among colleges regarding the selection and admission of students; to maintain common interest; to provide for mutual acquaintance and to bring the personnel of the association more directly in line with the true academic functions of the member institutions" (Howard 1987: 22). As the conditions which impacted and shaped higher education shifted and changed over the years, the Code of Ethics established by the original group changed into what is known today as the *Statement of Principles of Good Practice*. This standard is revised annually and as necessary to reflect new concerns for ethical admission practices. This policy reinforces the notion that ethical standards vary over time depending on the conditions at hand. The 1988 Statement, does, in fact deal, if not explicitly, then implicitly, with the questionable practices described earlier, stressing counseling over recruitment as the desired model for admission professionals. However, for many such professionals, the process of translating ethical guidelines into ethical practices breaks down in at least two ways:

First, while a shift in focus toward the student as counselee may combat some abuses, it may also promote a more subtle form of misrepresentation. Can an employee of a specific college or university be expected to counsel, to give guidance, or to make

recommendations based purely on the student and the information available without undue bias favoring the institution he or she represents? In addition, the role of counselor carries with it a tendency toward paternalism. The counselor often has more information and experience; and therefore may justify any misrepresentation as being in the best interest of a particular student. The student's choice, despite any well meaning intentions, is usurped by paternalism and is manipulated because of bias. But does this mean that the role of the admission professional necessarily borders on the unethical?

Webster's Dictionary initially defines the word "counsel" as: a mutual exchange of ideas, a discussion. If the counseling function of an admission professional is practiced in this sense of the word, the tendency towards paternalistic usurpation of choice would seem to diminish. A mutual exchange of ideas implies an equality, at least in terms of respect, for each of the participants in a communication exchange. Thus, the notion of one participant occupying a privileged position, thereby "licensed" to lead or guide one who is less informed and therefore "less able," is cancelled. The admission counselor, in this definition, assumes knowledge and ability on the part of the student and engages in a mutually enlightening and informative discourse. The guidance aspect of counseling, which implies leading, directing the course, and controlling, is superseded by an exchange of information. During this exchange, the value of each participant's input is judged as equal, even as differences in level of knowledge and access to information are acknowledged.

This approach to the admission counseling function is consistent with dialogic perspectives for evaluating communication ethics, perspectives which focus on the attitudes toward one another held by participants in a communication transaction (Johannesen 1983: 46). As a primary scholar in this area, Martin Buber's analysis of human relationships in terms of the I-Thou or dialogic relationship and the I-It or monologic relationship is relevant here. The I-Thou relationship points to "person communicating with person" in a dialogue which promotes development of self, personality, and knowledge. Johannesen describes this dialogical relationship further:

In dialogue, although interested in being understood and perhaps in influencing, a communicator does not attempt to impose his or her own truth or view on another. The communicator is not interested in bolstering his or her own ego or self image. Each person in a dialogic relationship is accepted as a unique individual (47). In dialogue there can be disagreement and attempts to influence. The difference lies in that the communicator advises rather than coerces or commands.

In opposition to this, Buber points to the I-It relationship in which communication is nonpersonal or impersonal. The monological communicator is described by Johannesen as: "A person (who) seeks to command, coerce, manipulate, conquer, dazzle, deceive, or exploit." Other persons are viewed as "things" to be exploited solely for the communicator's self-serving purpose; they are not taken seriously as persons. Choices are narrowed and consequences obscured" (53). A monologue is thus an attempt to impose one's program of belief or truth onto another from a privileged or superior position; thereby displaying a

defensive attitude of self-justification. The greater the extent to which monologue shuts out the possibility of dialogue, the more unethical the communication. The question now becomes: If counseling, in the sense of a dialogue between participants in a communication transaction, is desirable, how can this relationship be integrated into the admission function? Johannesen proposes conditions and contexts in which dialogue might occur: two-person, face-to-face, and oral communication settings that extend over lengthy periods of time (56). Unfortunately, this type of communication transaction occurs only very rarely in admissions. The sheer number of students, colleges, and universities make such transactions nearly impossible for many institutions.

So how can 1) misrepresentation, manipulation, and coercion in admission transactions be combatted; 2) the interests of the participants be served; and 3) dialogic communication be made possible? These questions bring us face to face with the second way in which the process of translating ethical statements into ethical practices breaks down at many colleges and universities. A large number of institutions have embraced a marketing orientation which focuses on the needs and desires of students and parents as consumers. In "Painting the Wrong Picture" King suggests: "Decisions about recruiting techniques may be easier if you ask yourself what would be in the student's best interest" (King 1987: 38). And Phil Kotler's definition of marketing implies that the best way to serve one's institution is to serve one's constituents:

Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose of achieving organizational objectives. It relies heavily on designing the organization's offerings in terms of the target market's needs and desires, and on using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and serve markets (quoted in Kemerer, Baldrige and Green 1982: 66).

However, in *Uses, Abuses, and Misuses of Marketing in Higher Education*, Lovelock and Rothschild (1980) present a very thorough analysis of marketing abuses in higher education in terms of the four key elements of the marketing mix: product, service delivery systems, pricing, and communication. In their view, the mistaken notion of marketing as another name for promotion or advertising is the impetus for the tendency to look at marketing abuses as misleading advertising or as unreasonable pressure by college admission personnel on students to enroll. Instead, it is their thesis that unethical communication practices form the mechanism that makes real abuse in the product and pricing elements of the marketing mix possible (54). What they refer to as the "communication view of marketing" is seen as a deceptively comfortable view for faculty and administration who can blame abuses conveniently on "semi-professionals outside the mainstream of institutional life who bring tainted values with

them and can be quickly exercised from the organization if they cause it any problems" (54). It is under this "communication view" of marketing that questionable admission practices continue to flourish. The student is seen as an entity which can be manipulated by pressing the right buttons. She or he also becomes a part of the product used and manipulated to serve the goals of the institution.

If extended dialogic exchanges with each student are improbable, if not physically impossible, and a distorted view of marketing enables abuses to flourish, can admission practices be ethical according to the perspective taken here? And if so, how can such ethical practices be achieved? Astin's discussion of involvement as the cornerstone of academic excellence provides a basis from which to develop guidelines that address both questions. In a 1985 article, Astin presents an alternative route to quality in higher education based on a theory of student involvement. He contrasts his notion of involvement and individualized pedagogical

theory with current standards of excellence and methods of teaching which he says are based on resource acquisition and enhancement of reputation. The involvement theory has two postulates:

First, the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. And second, the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (37).

As applied to admission programs and practices, these postulates could serve as the standards by which such programs and

practices are judged. Thus, the goal of an admission program would be to "elicit enough student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" and to emphasize "the active participation of the student in the learning process" (38). Such a program would focus less on what the admission counselor does, focusing more on what the student does. This could thereby help to eliminate the paternalistic tendency by giving students an active role in what is a learning process.

In addition, this type of program would work well in the context of an overall marketing orientation, and, at the same time, would guard against the manipulative tendencies of such an orientation. By granting students an active role while focusing on their needs, the process becomes less one of manipulating the right variables or pushing the right buttons, and more a transaction between individuals based on mutual respect along the lines of Buber's I-Thou relationship. For many, this will be a difficult attitude to assume. As discussed earlier, there is a tendency to assume that admission counselors are in a privileged position in regard to the student, a tendency exemplified by Pastin's comment that "our consumers are kids just out of high school who don't know what they are doing" (King 1987: 26). Such an

***"Decisions about recruiting techniques may be easier if you ask yourself what would be in the student's best interest"***

attitude is often well-intentioned but, as suggested previously, leads to justification of misrepresentation and, thereby, the limitation of students' choices.

To the extent that admission professionals see themselves as playing an integral role in the college experience, they should reflect the values of the institution they represent, as well as those of higher education as a whole. While there is currently a great deal of debate over what those values are or should be, most institutions would agree that the quest for knowledge and the development of habits of investigation are values of higher education. An admission program that emphasizes student involvement would serve as an introduction to those values. To work such a program would need to be supported by a similar emphasis on campus by faculty and administration. It would then address the reductive abuses pointed out by Lovelock and Rothschild (1980).

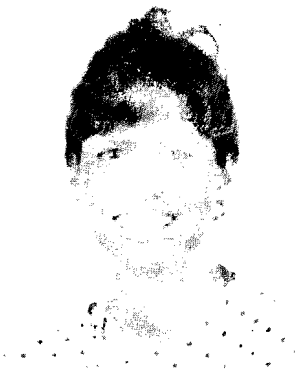
Admission professionals can begin to implement a program of involvement by considering the following question: How involved do current practices allow students to become? What do we do to involve them? How much of the process is based on a mutual exchange? How do we make available the evidence that would enable students to make informed decisions? Are we more concerned with demonstrating our institution's prestige and resources than with providing evidence of and opportunities for student learning and development? Applying these questions to the variety of admission practices will enable admission professionals to develop guidelines that govern practice. Along with Johnson (1989) and Terepka (1988), it is my belief that in becoming more aware of current practices and their ethical implications, admission professionals become better equipped to combat abusive tendencies. Putting the above proposal into practice is one way to encourage ethical awareness. The proposal also enables the realization of the student's full potential in a learning process where the focus is on the student as a *student* rather than as a consumer or a product. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Author's own observations, interviews with professionals in the field, and attendance at annual conferences of the NACAC (National Association of College Admission Counselors) and the IACAC (Illinois Association of College Admission Counselors).

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