



The Career College Information Source

# The Role of the Admissions Office in Restoring Public Trust in Career Colleges

*By Dr. Jean Norris, Managing Partner, Norton \Norris, Inc.*

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There certainly is enough evidence to support the belief that the attacks on the career college sector are highly orchestrated and political; yet an objective observer may see another viewpoint. Take for example the schools that actually are putting profit over good business practices. The media has certainly made it visible through their select choice of words (screaming FOR-PROFIT) and stories of unsuspecting students who were duped and now in devastating debt.

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admissions office have been called into question for years and more specifically, the actions of the admissions representative who

encouraged and supported the student to enroll in the first place.

It is time to take a look at how admission professionals can be a catalyst for regaining public trust and play an integral role in advancing the career college sector.

## **What admission professionals are up against**

As the sector recovers and pushes forward, there are a number of realities to address including:

**1. Consumers are questioning the value of a college degree.** With rising college costs and student debt (especially focused on career education), is a college degree worth the money and time investment?

As the economy recovers, the competition for many colleges oftentimes becomes the job market. But according to Janet Yellen, Federal Reserve chairwoman, she believes a degree is an essential part of earnings. In a recent commencement speech Yellen stated, “Last year, workers with degrees earned on average 70 percent more than those without. The gap was only 20 percent in 1980.”

In contrast, Long (2016) shows that long-term unemployment is still high with over 2.1 million Americans not

being able to secure a job for over six months. In fact, many just give up trying. Perhaps this can be traced back to flat wage growth. When adjusting for inflation, the median income level is about the same as it was 20 years ago.

So although a degree can impact earnings significantly, what if the economy doesn't support the jobs and pay necessary? With all the focus on a college education as a return on investment model and government requirements on gainful employment, this could be a tough time for career colleges in particular.

**2. Increased consumer awareness of the condemnation of for-profits.** The news and social media outlets didn't waste any time jumping on the bandwagon to push stories of evil for-profits harming students (Hess & Kelly, 2010). The fact that they choose to use the term "for-profit" as a lead in

every report and story is troublesome and yet insightful. There was a time when students didn't realize there was a difference between schools/colleges offering education based on tax status – but now they do.

Although there is acknowledgement that there are great schools and colleges out there with a tax-paying status, it has meant consumers are more cautious to not be duped.

**3. NACAC is operating against career college admission professionals.** The National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) was originally created as an organization supporting students, admission counselors and high school guidance professionals. Not only do they forbid admission professionals from for-profit colleges to join, they have spent considerable effort throwing for-profit career colleges under the bus.



**DR. JEAN NORRIS** is the leading advocate and expert for the admissions profession. Her unique mix of experience working in the enrollment trenches, consulting for hundreds of organizations and training thousands of professionals makes her a sought after speaker and presenter.

Her research, articles, and interviews can be found in many well-known publications serving the sector.

She began her educational pursuit in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program and went on to earn a B.A. in Management from National Louis University; a M.A. in Communication and Training from Governor's State University and an Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership from the University of Sarasota. Jean is also a Licensed Master Neurolinguistic Programming Practitioner.

In her 29 year, higher education career, Jean served in the role of admissions representative, dean of admissions, faculty member, academic dean, vice president of marketing, vice president of enrollment, and vice president of organizational development at private colleges and universities. Currently Jean is a managing partner at **Norton Norris, Inc.**, a Chicago-based marketing/consulting/training firm focused

exclusively in the higher education sector.

Jean is the developer of EnrollMatch® – a comprehensive admissions training program offering proven results to balance compliance and performance. In 2015, Dr. Norris launched **MyGuidance Coach® (MGC)**, a patent-pending student software system that provides pre-enrollment advising for prospective students 24/7 and significant ROI for schools!

Dr. Norris serves as an executive board member for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF). Jean and her son, Mike, authored and published their first book "No Sugar Added – Straight Talk From Those Living With Diabetes" with all proceeds to benefit JDRF in their search for a cure. The International Independent Publishers Association awarded their book with a bronze medal from amongst hundreds of titles submitted from 16 countries.

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In their student brochure, “For-Profit Colleges – Know Before You Enroll” it states, “While there are many schools that can offer you a quality degree or certificate, unfortunately some for-profit schools engage in aggressive and misleading recruitment practices that overstate program quality and graduation and job placement rates, leaving students with a lot of debt, underemployment and economic hardship. Be aware that some for-profit colleges may not have your best interests in mind.”

**4. The career college business model places undue burden on admissions.** At the core of the problems facing the sector is an outdated business model. There is no need to apologize for making a profit in higher education but it has to be done in a way that requires different metrics.

The enrollment funnel has long been established as the way to predict return on investment. Simply put, a college invests a set amount of money on inquiry generation with the expectation of conversion rates all the way through to starting classes and graduating. That’s it. Administrators have it down to a predictable science that provides a level of comfort. The problem is many of these conversion rates are no longer valid. Here in lies the major problem.

For instance, why hold admissions representatives responsible for the number of appointments they set and how many show up on campus? These are clearly two activities that have changed with the times. Prospective students don’t respond to a phone call nor do they want to be bothered with setting an appointment to come on campus especially when they can get most of the information they need from this “new invention” called the internet.

This performance expectation puts

undue pressure on the admissions professional which can result in bad practices such as annoying the consumer with incessant (and desperate) attempts. In his article entitled, “Are All For-Profit Colleges Rip-Off’s,” Andrew Josuweit gives advice to those checking out the career college option. Beyond the typical advice of asking about accreditation and fully understanding the investment, he stresses to avoid high-pressure sales tactics.

Another area to question is the value of the admissions interview – a decades old approach of getting to know a prospective student to see if there is a good match. In concept this sounds fine however the activity has become problematic for a few reasons including:

- It is time consuming – usually taking an hour to complete. This is an expensive activity for the school as well as for the prospective student.
- High school counselors have stated that the career college admissions model is problematic for their students wanting to apply. Time in class is dedicated to researching and filling out applications and yet most career colleges make even the most basic information difficult to obtain. Online applications appear to be lead generation forms versus an authentic application for admission.
- There is no scientific evidence the traditional admissions interview actually improves student fit, retention or meaningful outcomes.
- Excessive pressure to secure an enrollment has led to

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misrepresentation, fraudulent behavior and unethical behavior during the admissions interview. In fact, Andrew Josuweit goes on to advise prospective students that “some of the less reputable schools pressure potential students to sign up on the spot. Do not give in to a tough sales pitch,” he states. Further, “if a school pressures you to make a quick decision, take that as a signal to walk away.”

- A majority of admission professionals are not trained or qualified to advise students on the 5 key dimensions of student fit (Cheatham, C., Gormley, S. & Norris, J.).
- The typical conversion rate from qualified lead/inquiry to start is less than 15 percent meaning the approach fails over 85 percent of the time (which means failing 85 out of 100 prospective students). The numbers are even worse when extending the metrics from inquiry to graduation.

### **Regaining public trust**

Many industries including media, politics, banking and automakers have been in the unfortunate position career colleges find themselves in today – regaining public trust. What strategies can the sector adopt to re-establish a sense of comfort with consumers, accreditors, the media and government agencies?

Richard Edelman, the president and CEO of Edelman, the world’s largest private public relations firm has some lessons to share. Trust in his company fell dramatically after it was discovered that he worked for coal companies and those who denied climate change was even an issue. Public backlash ensued and he rescinded his support – but it was too late.

His advice to CEO’s is to balance

making profits while answering societal problems. According to Grenoble (2016), Edelman specifically called out “Unilever CEO Paul Polman and his work with sustainability; Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, who is helping with youth unemployment; and General Electric’s environmental impact reduction strategy called ‘Ecomagination.’”

This viewpoint is supported by Minow (2016) who states, “that 91 percent of global consumers will switch to brands that support a social or environmental cause. Another 90 percent will boycott a company if they think its business practices are immoral or irresponsible. Companies like Wells Fargo and Volkswagen have suffered incalculable damage to their reputations – and their brands – due to legal and ethical violations. The trust of the consumer is as vitally important as the value of its products. Helms says that 42 percent of a company’s reputation is based on consumer perceptions of the firm’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. She strongly encourages companies to not only give back, but communicate their CSR activities to increase the trust and public perception.”

Another group that has had their fair share of public floggings is the media – especially after the recent election. According to Hemingway (2016), 94 percent of people surveyed said they don’t trust the media. In fact, Americans have about the same trust in the news media as they have in Congress (George, 2016).

So what can we learn from their woes? It starts with self-reflection and an honest look in the mirror. For the media, admitting there is a problem is the first, big step. Hemingway says, “it’s not just making some brief illusion to having kinda sorta messed up 2016 predictions a little bit. No, it needs to be a full acknowledgement of

everything they've done wrong. Since they clearly have not even the slightest clue of what they've done wrong, we need them to start listening to critics instead of drumming them into silence. The consumers will be the ones to decide when the apologies are enough, not the people giving awards to each other."

In other words, take a hard and unbiased look at your own school or department. If there is an inkling of truth that profit reigns supreme over exceptional student outcomes, start cleaning house now. The profit motive is essential in any business but it does need to be balanced. Consider this, "nonprofits, just like for-profit businesses and governments, need to invest in strong financial management and internal control systems (which is all overhead). A recent autopsy of the collapse of New York City's largest human services provider, which left 120,000 people in need of another service provider, revealed that much of the problem concerned lack of internal systems caused in part by failure to be paid for necessary administrative costs. The rhetoric condemns overhead, but the reality is administrative costs are essential for any organization to function efficiently and effectively."

In a recent article by Joseph R. D'Angelo, he states, "Indeed, the good news is that for-profit-college administrators can undertake a number of restructuring alternatives, without resorting to filing for bankruptcy, to improve their business operations, maintain accreditation, strengthen financial resources, improve use of campus resources and bolster enrollment. But owners and administrators at these institutions can be – and must be – willing to be accountable, as well as more open to restructuring, if the goal is not just to survive but also to thrive."

He goes on to say, "When assessing

institutional resources, owners of for-profits should also evaluate management and teaching staff. They might hire more counselors and advisers, when instead they should be more effectively training the employees that they do have to perform better and to foster a culture that encourages students not only to enroll in the institution but also to persist and graduate."

A second recommendation is to take a hard look at leadership and staff composition and commitment. In other words, is the office filled with old school thinking and people who will fight to defend

outdated methods and beliefs? Ask yourself if there is a fresh mix of new ideas and leadership that is open and has the

energy to reinvent the sector. One nonprofit organization (the Wounded Warrior Project) that found they had lost the trust of the public has these ideas to share:

- First and foremost, ask yourself "what am I doing today to advance my organization's mission?" If something feels more of a personal benefit than a mission necessity, rethink it.
- At the next staff meeting (and on a regular basis), devote time to reviewing and reiterating existing policies on such things as conflicts of interest, whistleblower rules, reimbursement policies, etc.
- At the next board meeting, review the concerns raised by news stories and ask whether there are revisions to old policies or new policies that are appropriate for your organization. And actively explore whether your systems are strong enough to block or at least identify problems.
- Staff and board members alike

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should take advantage of available resources. In many states, there are programs built around Principles and Practices or Standards for Excellence that provide proven guidance on how to operate efficiently, effectively, legally and ethically.

- Every individual in the community should revisit the truth that we exist to serve others, that each of us must be a responsible steward for our organization's mission – and for the community as a whole – and that we each must earn the public's trust every single day. Our communities are counting on us.

### The first steps back

The themes of those who have regained public trust include balancing the profit motive with student and societal good. This will require taking a hard look at business practices, organizational structure and alignment. Let's break this down into some actionable steps:

**1. Think societal good first.** At a basic level, consider what your school offers the community. What would they lose if your school went away? On a larger scale, if one thinks of education as a global, common good, how can your college engage more effectively with other stakeholders (especially in the creation, transmissions, acquisition, and validation of knowledge)?

- Many career colleges donate services to the public such as food and clothing drives, blood pressure checks, financial aid seminars and guest speakers. Now ... think bigger and strategically. Since the admissions office is where much of the distrust resides, what can be done here to regain the faith of the public while serving society to a higher degree?

- Keep in mind that the activities cannot be lead generation in nature but rather fill a need in the community in which your campuses operate. Examples include a computer summer camp for kids and offering your facility as a place for local businesses or groups to meet.
- Getting your admissions team out in the community is also critical to build relationships and trust. Consider providing release time for your admissions team for community service tied to educational initiatives such as tutoring, serving as a teacher's aide, reading to patient's at the hospital or senior center, etc.
- It's also important to empower your admissions team with enhanced training and education. To serve society to a higher degree means that you have to have individuals who have a high level of cognitive ability, knowledge, skills and abilities to serve a variety of audiences.
- Consider strategic partnerships at a local and national level to identify other opportunities for educational development and dissemination for the good of society (Tawil, S. & Locatelli, R., 2015).

**2. Establish new ways of measuring organizational success.** As mentioned, making money is essential to effectively operate any business so updating the career college business model is critical. The driving force of profit has to be focused on a larger percentage of gainfully employed graduates. This will require major changes in admissions including a focus on quality over quantity. Consider the following:

- Determine if open enrollment is appropriate for your school or if you should be more selective to

reach successful student outcomes.

- Lead/inquiry generation must continue to focus on quality over quantity. This is in part due to decreased ROI in conversions along with bad business practices that have harmed the sector.
- Consider adapting the outdated admissions interview for a more meaningful student interaction that adds value for the student as well as proven data to determine fit in advance of enrolling.
- Encourage full transparency and 24/7 access to information and service for prospective students.
- Realign quality and quantity of staff to maximize service and dollars earned. Long gone are the days of “my reps don’t have enough leads/inquiries.” Right-size your team to fit the flow of quality inquiries and invest in higher conversions and better retention.

**3. Get the word out.** Establish strategic and meaningful public relations versus self-serving news. This will only backfire if viewed as a thinly veiled attempt at lead generation and not in the best interest of society.

Ongoing public relations efforts also build value for the role your school and employees play in the community. Beyond what your students are doing in the community add in the value of your school by employing members of the community, results of taxes paid by your school into the community, and volunteer efforts of employees. This can simultaneously build your brand, good will, and insulate against any harmful press that may occur. Additionally, you can also be a mouthpiece for the value of higher education in transforming lives.

So yes, the political tide has turned. But never forget that the waves of change are relentless. For career

college leaders there is an opportunity to not only remain viable but play a major role in the future of higher education. This will take honest self-reflection and the courage to align business practices with societal good and student outcomes.

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**-Fred Freedman, President/CEO,  
Pima Medical Institute**

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