Aligning Competencies with Success: What does it take to be an effective admissions counselor

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Abstract
The admissions counselor position is a common entry-level professional position in higher education. However, little is known about the competencies needed to be successful in this position. Through interviews with entry-level admissions counselors, this study sought to better understand these competencies and their alignment with the recently created ACPA/NASPA Student Affairs competencies. Results and implications for practice are discussed.

Disciplines
Education Economics | Higher Education Administration | Higher Education and Teaching | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

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Aligning

COMPETENCIES
SUCCESS

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

Although admissions counselor is a common first professional position, few formal assessments have been conducted to identify the skills needed to be successful in this position. This study sought to understand the competencies needed to be a successful admissions counselor by interviewing admissions counselors early in their careers. Specifically, this study sought to explore the alignment between the NASPA/ACPA professional competencies and those described by entry-level admissions counselors. Soliciting the perspective of individuals relatively new to the field is important because they are best able to accurately describe the competencies required to be effective admissions counselors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Admissions counselor positions vary according to institutional type, but most require promoting their institution to prospective students and their families, giving presentations, conducting administrative tasks, and collaborating with faculty and other staff members (National Association for College Admission Counseling n.d.). Admissions counselors work with students on critical issues related to college access, affordability, and the transition to college. Traditionally, admissions offices have reported to student affairs or academic affairs divisions (Duang 2003, Kuk 2009), but the current trend is for admissions offices to be assigned to a larger enrollment management division. This division may also include financial aid, the registrar's office, orientation, and retention services and may report to student affairs, the provost, or the president (Boontanger 2004, Vander Schee 2007). These different reporting structures reflect the variety of work in which admissions officers engage. Although they work closely with students, admissions professionals also need to understand business and marketing principles and to be knowledgeable about student financial aid and institutional policies, practices,
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Although much has been written regarding the skills admissions counselors need, little research has examined these competencies from the perspective of individuals currently in entry-level positions. The ACPR/NSAC competencies were written by senior-level student affairs administrators and graduate preparation program faculty. And although each such individual provides a valuable perspective, none may have had any experience working in admissions or have had direct contact with entry-level professionals in admissions counselor positions.

Several studies have investigated the professional competencies required of new student affairs professionals. Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) reviewed more than 1,200 student affairs job descriptions to understand which competencies such positions require. Admissions positions represented only 2.6 percent of the job descriptions that were reviewed. Both Ren and Hodger (2007) pilot study of ten new professionals and Item and Jessup-Anger’s (2008) year-long study of 30 new professionals provide suggestions for improving graduate education in order to meet the needs of new professionals. These suggestions are useful, but no entry-level admissions professionals participated in the studies. In order to understand the competencies learned in a graduate program and the extent to which the competencies were used in their first professional position, Waple (2006) surveyed entry-level professionals who had completed a master’s degree in student affairs. (It is not clear that admissions professionals were included in this study.) In contrast, the present study expands previous research on student affairs competencies by focusing specifically on admissions positions. Information regarding the competencies needed to be an effective admissions counselor could support admissions professionals’ hiring, supervising, and training.

Admissions office positions are common gateways into the student affairs profession and are critical for institutional viability. As institutions rely increasingly on tuition to meet operating expenses (College Board 2002), admissions offices are under increased pressure to meet enrollment goals. Even more broadly, some of the most significant challenges confronting higher education today—access, affordability, and retention—are addressed and influenced by policies and practices of admissions offices (Davenport, Martinez-Saenz, and Rhine 2011) and are carried out by entry-level admissions professionals. What are the skills and competencies needed to be an effective admissions counselor?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a purposeful sampling technique (Miles and Huberman 1994) and was granted Institutional Review Board approval prior to seeking participants. Participants were solicited through e-mails and listserv via the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), the Iowa Association for College Admissions Counseling (Iowa ACAC), the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and personal connections in admissions offices across the country. Participants ultimately included sixteen admissions counselors who had been in position for between six months and three years.

Although many admissions counselors positions require only a bachelor’s degree (NACAC n.d.), this study focuses in part on those who had earned a master’s degree in student affairs or a related area. Data can be used to inform new professionals—regardless of their degree—but focusing on those who had earned a master’s degree provided the opportunity to examine the impact of graduate school preparation. Participants who had earned bachelor’s degrees were also able to describe the competencies and skills needed, as well as preparation for the field that occurred outside of a graduate program.

**Interview Protocol**

Participants were interviewed in person or via telephone. Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and focused on participants’ perceptions of the competencies and skills needed for their position; their level of preparedness for their position based on their previous experiences; and their suggestions for improvement.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected through topical individual interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Individual interviews were selected as the appropriate method because, as Rubin and Rubin (2012) state, “[T]hrough such interviews researchers explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from their perspective.” Interviews were conducted between June and November 2013 and were audiotaped and transcribed.

A non-standardized interview technique (Denzin 1978) was utilized: A list of prescribed questions preceded follow-up questions asked by the interviewer. Inductive coding procedures (Seidman 1998) were used to review each transcript separately and to code the data into specific categories.

**RESULTS**

Sixteen participants were interviewed for this study. Participants represented a variety of institutional sizes and types, from large, public research institutions (five), to mid-size comprehensive (one), to small, private, liberal arts universities (ten). One individual worked at a women’s college, and three others worked at religiously affiliated institutions.

One participant had a master’s degree in sociology, two had master’s degrees in higher education, and three were working toward their master’s degrees in higher education or student affairs. The remaining ten participants held bachelor’s degrees from a variety of disciplines.

**Competencies**

When asked which skills/competencies were needed to be successful in their roles, admissions counselors highlighted several of the ACPR/NSAC competencies: student learning and development; equity, diversity, and inclusion; advising and helping; assessment, evaluation and research; and law, policy, and governance.

**Student Learning and Development**

The competency of student learning and development was deemed necessary particularly by those professionals who had completed or who were in the process of completing a master’s degree in student affairs. These participants said that coursework in student development had helped prepare them for their role in admissions. One participant did not mention student learning specifically but recognized the importance of helping students see a “fit” between their needs and what the institution had to offer: “...to make sure they live comfortably to have that personal and intellectual growth.”

This participant perceived student development to be part of his role as an admissions counselor: he worked

with students not only to meet their needs but also to encourage them to seek personal and intellectual growth during college.

**Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

Admissions counselors also identified diversity and working with a wide variety of people as a competency that is needed to be successful. Being able to converse with and provide resources for diverse others—as, for example, from different socioeconomic levels, different races and ethnicities, different geographic areas, and other varying demographics—enables admissions counselors to meet the needs of all of those with whom they work. Equity, diversity, and inclusion also play a significant role in admissions and higher education access, as described by this participant who serves on a diversity committee:

I think it particularly sparked my interest in diversity issues within admissions and issues of access and seeing the kind of privilege that our students bring with them when they come here and some of the less privileged students and how that affects their time here at [institution]. So now I’m very conscious of those issues when I’m communicating and recruiting and in my efforts in recruiting new students...

Being skilled in the equity, diversity, and inclusion competency, then, enables admissions counselors to have one-on-one conversations with diverse others and also to consider higher education access and diversity issues within a larger context. Several interviews also featured discussion of diversity and recruitment issues. A significant aspect of admissions counselors’ availability is recruitment; having an understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion may also be important to recruiting specific, targeted student populations.

**Advising and Helping**

"I feel like a counselor" was a common statement. Although admissions counselors may be perceived by some as institutional "salespersons," many identified more closely with an advisor or helper. For participants, this included being able to help students determine "fit":

I would say that I really push more toward the counseling side of things. One thing I’m very aware of or very conscious about is that I never assume that the
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Assessment, Evaluation, and Research
Admissions counselors discussed reading or analyzing data, presenting data, and conducting research on various aspects of their roles. Participants who had earned master's degrees shared similar experiences and were able to use their learning in graduate school directly to their current responsibilities. Participants who had only earned bachelor's degrees did not mention assessment, evaluation, and research as often; they perceived expertise in these areas as "value added." In fact, participants with skills in these areas were subsequently given additional opportunities to expand their roles as admissions counselors.

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Participants said that they came to understand "the politics of the school" and "the politics of working for a state university" through their work. However, one participant specified that she had learned "where the funding comes from—how it's all doled out and that process" through her master's in higher education course.

Knowing "the difference between public and private schools" was another area participants believed to be important, particularly in talking with students and their families about their decisions about college and in understanding higher education in general. One participant also mentioned that it was important to be knowledgeable about certain aspects of law, policy, and governance: "Having a sense of the laws and policies that guide admissions and related practices helps ensure that you're not doing something that's illegal."

Additional Traits
In addition to competencies, many participants also spoke of personality traits or qualities they believed were necessary to be successful admissions counselors. The traits they described fell into three categories: organizational, communication, and interpersonal skills.

Organization
Many participants described organizational skills as crucial, particularly given the demands of travel, event planning, and other required tasks and responsibilities. Being organized was a critical skill. One admission counselor said: [First and foremost, good organization and good planning skills are necessary]. I found those to be of the utmost importance this past year, and I'm sure I will again as I look forward to fall travel, admitted students day, and my work as coordinator for the intern program. Making sure you have thought of both the broad picture and the minute details is so important in the kind of work that we do, and especially in terms of [work-related] responsibilities.

Many participants were involved in significant amounts of travel to high schools and college fairs. One participant said, "You have to be organized; you have to be on top of the amount of schools you're visiting in a day, when the college fairs are coming up, and how you approach this travel."

In addition to being organized—particularly as it relates to event planning—admissions counselors reported that time management and balancing and prioritizing responsibilities were crucial skills.

Time management is another [crucial skill], especially during the travel season when we are on the road so much—balancing the fairs and the visits to the different high schools and the events and just being able to coordinate those and ensure that all of that is taken care of effectively while also balancing the needs of what's going on in the office, even when you are on the road—email, phone calls, and other projects as well....

Communication
Communication, in the form of individual as well as small-group conversations and small and large group presentations, was a competency admissions counselors deemed necessary. Counselors said, "Communication overall is really important" and "Convivial skills are very important because all you do is talk." Counselors speak with students, family members, high school guidance counselors, and colleagues from other institutions as well as their own. For their individual interactions to be successful, admissions counselors rely on their ability to communicate clearly, to be articulate, and to be professional.

In addition to representing their institutions in individual conversations, admissions counselors do so through presentations during campus and high school visits and college fairs: [Public speaking is important]. [When we go on the road, we have to have a very professional demeanor and be able to communicate clearly and efficiently, especially at some of our larger fairs and larger presentations.]

Participants emphasized the importance of confidence, as well, as they had to be able to "share data in a way that is interesting, profound, and fun." In addition, they had to "adjust to the audience" and provide information in an effective way for different numbers and types of students and family members.
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Interpersonal Skills

Many counselors discussed the role of interpersonal skills, particularly in conversations and interactions with prospective students. As when they adjust their presentation styles and interact with various audiences, admissions counselors rely on their interpersonal skills when they interact with different groups. One participant described her interpersonal skills as "being able to listen and work with different groups, and especially working with diverse groups and understanding what the needs of each person." Others said that admissions counselors' interpersonal skills take the form of being a "people person," being reliable, having empathy for people and their situations, and "genuinely car[ing] about human beings." Several counselors emphasized customer service skills and common courtesy as being important in working with students and their families.

**DISCUSSION**

Of the ten ACRA/NASPA professional competencies, half were identified by entry-level admissions counselors as being necessary for success in their position. Five (ethical professional practice; history, philosophy, and values; human and organizational resources; leadership; and personal foundations) were not mentioned specifically, though participants alluded to their importance.

Tenets of the leadership competency—"as, for example, being a contributing staff member and working as a member of a team"—were also mentioned. Supervising and training students to give campus tours, being able to resolve conflicts, and using resources appropriately were responsibilities admissions counselors cited as relating to the human and organizational resources competency.

"Personal foundations" describes some of the intrinsic values that admissions counselors require for the work they do; they include being self-motivated and directed and being willing to sacrifice personal time for travel. History, philosophy, and values were also cited, primarily in participants' discussion of the counselor versus salesperson approach to admissions counseling. And finally, ethical and professional practice was captured in participants' discussion of professionalism within their roles, especially with regard to representing their institutions.

The results of this study have implications for admissions offices. As mentioned earlier, although the admissions counselor position is a gateway into the student affairs profession, little research has been conducted regarding this role. In addition, little research has been done to examine the extent to which the ACRA/NASPA competencies are relevant to the work of admissions counselors. Participant responses suggest that many of the competencies are critical for successful work in the admissions office. However, in addition to these competencies, specific traits such as organization and interpersonal skills were mentioned consistently across participant interviews.

This finding is consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's (2002) competency model, which identifies specific traits needed for a profession (e.g., student affairs), the competencies that are the culmination of various knowledge and skills, and the application of the competencies. The results of this study illustrate a similar trend. While competencies are necessary, other traits, such as organization, communication, and interpersonal skills, provide a foundation on which to build professional skills; without this foundation, other competencies may not be useful.

By identifying traits and competencies necessary for admissions counselors to be successful, the results of this study can be used to inform the hiring and supervision of entry-level admissions counselors. Rather than viewing admissions counselors solely as "recruiters" or "salespeople," this study helps to articulate the skills and competencies these entry-level professionals must possess to be successful. In addition, the results of this study can be used to inform new professionals about the work that will be required of them, to illustrate the skills and competencies they will gain from the position, and to create professional development opportunities to enhance and strengthen the work of admissions counselors.

Results of this study also have implications for the ACRA/NASPA competencies and for graduate study in student affairs. Participants with and without master's degrees identified competencies, adding credibility and validity to the list of ACRA/NASPA competencies. The understanding that derives from the competencies contributes to the work of admissions counselors during their first few years on the job and plays a role throughout their long-term professional development.

However, the study also highlights the importance of graduate work in student affairs. Several participants who had obtained master's degrees in student affairs cited coursework in areas such as student development, assessment, and research that had assisted them in their role as admissions counselor. A master's degree is not required for many admissions positions, but being able to conduct assessments, advise students, and understand the broader context of higher education policies and law can provide counselors who have earned master's degrees with a significant advantage.

**LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While this study provides insight into admissions counselors' experiences and their perspective as to which competencies are needed to be successful, it does have limitations. As a result, several areas of future research can be recommended.

Because this study was qualitative, participants' experiences and the findings from the data analysis are not generalizable to all admissions counselors. Due to the small sample size of this study, it cannot be assumed that all or even most admissions counselors are prepared for their roles in the same way this study's participants seem to have been. As cited in this study, the competencies and skills that are necessary for admissions counselors to be successful can help us understand how to best prepare admissions counselors for the field. But more work is needed to fully understand the nuances of these competencies. For example, other factors, such as social identities, the role of supervisors, institutional type, and involvement in professional development opportunities, could also influence admissions counselors' preparedness (as could other experiences not focused on by this study). It is also important to note that participants chose to share their experiences; self-reported data should be analyzed and approached with caution.

The amount of time participants had spent in their current roles is also an area for future research. Although the purpose of this study was to focus on admissions professionals who had spent between six months and three years in their roles, the competencies needed to be a successful admissions counselor may change over time. Future research could help us understand what skills are needed and how they are learned from colleagues who have been in the field for longer periods of time.

This study focused on new professionals' perspectives; future research could incorporate the views of mid- and senior-level professionals. Insights from these more seasoned professionals who are also responsible for hiring and training new professionals would add significantly to the research on admissions counselors' competencies.

Despite these limitations, this study provides insight into the competencies needed to be a successful admissions counselor. Professionals who have worked in admissions offices typically understand the tasks needed to be successful, but little empirical evidence exists to document these competencies. Further research focused on reporting lines and competency areas could help clarify how admissions counselors perceive themselves and what skills they require in order to be successful.

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore the competencies and skills admissions counselors need in order to be successful within their first three years in the position. Interviews of 16 admissions counselors from across the country at different types of institutions made it clear that organization, communication, and interpersonal skills are the primary skills needed. Components of all of the student affairs competencies were also mentioned, as were some job responsibilities and roles. Understanding which competencies are most important to admissions counselors' professional success can help ensure that the preparation and training of admissions counselors—whether in master's degree programs or through on-the-job training—is as effective as possible. After all, it is these professionals who represent their institutions, recruit students, and provide access to higher education.

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Interpersonal Skills

Many counselors discussed the role of interpersonal skills, particularly in conversations and interactions with prospective students. As when they adjust their presentation styles and interact with various audiences, admissions counselors rely on their interpersonal skills when they interact with different groups. One participant described her interpersonal skills as "being able to listen and work with different groups, and especially working with diverse groups and understanding what the needs are of each person."

Others said that admissions counselors' interpersonal skills take the form of being a "people person," being relatable, having empathy for people and their situations, and "genuinely care[ing] about human beings." Several counselors emphasized customer service skills and common courtesy as being important in working with students and their families.

DISCUSSION

Of the ten ACRA/NASPA professional competencies, half were identified by entry-level admissions counselors as being necessary for success in their position. Five (ethical professional practice; history, philosophy, and values; human and organizational resources; leadership; and personal foundations) were not mentioned specifically, though participants alluded to their importance.

Tenets of the leadership competency—as, for example, being a contributing staff member and working as a member of a team—were also mentioned. Supervising and training students to give campus tours, being able to resolve conflict, and using resources appropriately were responsibilities admissions counselors cited as relating to the human and organizational resources competency.

"Personal foundations" describes some of the intrinsic values that admissions counselors require for the work they do; they include being self-motivated and directed and being willing to sacrifice personal time for travel. History, philosophy, and values were also cited, primarily in participants' discussion of the counselor versus salesperson approach to admissions counseling. And finally, ethical and professional practice was captured in participants' discussion of professionalism within their roles, especially with regard to representing their institutions.

The results of this study have implications for admissions offices. As mentioned earlier, although the admissions counselor position is a gateway into the student affairs profession, little research has been conducted regarding this role. In addition, little research has been done to examine the extent to which the ACRA/NASPA competencies are relevant to the work of admissions counselors. Participant responses suggest that many of the competencies are critical for successful work in the admissions office. However, in addition to these competencies, specific traits such as organization and interpersonal skills were mentioned consistently across participant interviews.

This finding is consistent with the U.S. Department of Education's (2005) competency model, which identifies specific traits needed for a profession (e.g., student affairs), the competencies that are the culmination of various knowledge and skills, and the application of the competencies. The results of this study illustrate a similar trend. While competencies are necessary, other traits, such as organization, communication, and interpersonal skills, provide a foundation on which to build professional skills. Without this foundation, other competencies may not be useful.

By identifying traits and competencies necessary for admissions counselors to be successful, the results of this study can be used to inform the hiring and supervision of entry-level admissions counselors. Rather than viewing admissions counselors solely as "recruiters" or "salespeople," this study helps to articulate the skills and competencies these entry-level professionals must possess to be successful. In addition, the results of this study can be used to inform new professionals about the work that will be required of them, to illustrate the skills and competencies they will gain from the position, and to create professional development opportunities to enhance and strengthen the work of admissions counselors.

Results of this study also have implications for the ACRA/NASPA competencies and for graduate study in student affairs. Participants with and without master's degrees identified competencies, adding credibility and validity to the list of ACRA/NASPA competencies. The understanding that derives from the competencies contributes to the work of admissions counselors during their first few years on the job and plays a role throughout their long-term professional development.

However, the study also highlights the importance of graduate work in student affairs. Several participants who had obtained master's degrees in student affairs cited coursework in areas such as student development, assessment, and research that had assisted them in their role as an admissions counselor. A master's degree is not required for many admissions positions, but being able to conduct assessments, advise students, and understand the broader context of higher education policies and law can provide counselors who have earned master's degrees with a significant advantage.

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