

by Jerome A. Lucido

# Seeking the Admission Hybrid

Response to “Gatekeepers or Marketers: Reclaiming the Educational Role of Chief Admission Officers” on page 92

When one thinks of seminal publications in college admission, the first piece that comes to mind is B. Alden Thresher’s *College Admissions in the Public Interest* (1966). Thresher’s work, relevant to this day, is credited with being the foundational document of the admission profession. It identified college admission as “The Great Sorting”; it identified the social and cultural determinants of college aspirations and placement; it called for intelligent analysis of the impact of our work on the larger society; it identified maximization of prestige as a motivator for students and institutions; and it called for thoughtful and aware practitioners of the profession.

McDonough and Robertson’s 1995 study, commissioned by NACAC, traces the rise of the profession that Thresher is credited with creating. Like Thresher, the social and educational values that are the underpinnings of college admission inform the analysis and provide a productive backdrop against which to identify a profession grappling with growth and change. Viewed in time, this study encompasses roughly two-thirds of the history of the profession, 29 years after its foundation (Thresher in 1966) and 16 years prior to today (2011). One could argue, though, that the pace of change has accelerated so quickly in the past 16 years, that it may be more accurate to see McDonough/Robertson as a view at the midpoint. Either way, it is remarkable to look at their work again today in view of what it found, how it identified emergent trends, and what it asks the profession to consider in the face of challenges to its educational purposes.

In their study, we find that a profession of full-time administrators with distinctive responsibilities has risen from a part-time faculty or registrar’s role. In other words, we find the emergence of a distinct profession, oftentimes

home grown within the admission staff or recruited from admission offices elsewhere. Alongside this, we note that the seeds of a new organizing concept, enrollment management, have begun to take root in colleges and universities. We also observe the morphing of an educational role to a marketing function.

Indeed, McDonough and Robertson document what so many of today’s admission professionals feel, from the counselor to the dean; namely, their movement as professionals from educator to marketer. Respondents to their study demonstrate that the marketing course becomes preferred to the counseling course or to one in measurement and statistics for purposes of practical preparation. Pressures for enrollment productivity in the face of demographic change and institutional ambition emerge. Recruitment becomes the name of the game, giving rise to commercial entities for test preparation and publication of guidebooks. Moreover, the change in admission drives a change in student behavior. Well-situated students now engage private consultants to craft a college search and hone an application. Students and institutions now market themselves.

Today’s observers will note that fully-blown enrollment management operations have since emerged and that ever-increasing pressures on metrics, such as the number of admission applications, admission rates and test score averages, are the prevalent measuring sticks for admission success. They may also note the shifting demographic landscape and ask, “What does all this have to do with helping students understand the preparation they need, how to select and apply for a college, and how to take responsibility for their personal growth?” Quite frankly, we can hope that the work has *something* to do with these educationally sound and fundamental

purposes. Yet, it is clear that swinging the pendulum back toward educational purpose is on the minds of practitioners.

Indeed, in 1995 McDonough and Robertson called for a reasonable and practical change by proposing a hybrid—a blended position of marketer and educator. What was their justification? They saw that the dearth of college counseling in America’s high schools meant that students must rely on the college admission staff above others for the critical information about transition from high school to college. These conditions have not changed, unless we admit that we have ceded much of this responsibility to commercial entities or to no one at all. Additionally, the authors called for greater development of junior admission professionals to create the future leaders in the field and to increase the penetration of women and minorities in leadership roles.

Tellingly, the NACAC 2011 National Conference convention hall was laden with sessions devoted to the issues that were illuminated by McDonough and Robertson. We often find ourselves marveling at the prescience of Thresher’s timeless document, and justifiably so. Yet, McDonough and Robertson are prescient in their own way. The value of good research and cogent analysis cannot be understated. May we hear the call and act accordingly.



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