

# Admissions Training Strategies

*With Jean Norris, Norton Norris, Inc.*

*Jean, why do people hire your organization to conduct admissions staff training? Why don't they do it themselves?*

Our particular training is unique in the sense that it incorporates a number of different approaches that aren't currently being used in admissions training. A lot of players in the career college sector end up having their internal trainers do their admissions training. Those trainers tend to just pass along whatever they've learned and however they've done things in the past, and there's an assumption that if somebody was a good admissions rep that they'll be a good trainer. I think people are starting to realize that the two jobs require completely different skill sets, and that admissions reps may need different kinds of training from what has been typical.

*Are schools adapting your system of admissions sales, or can you adapt to their systems, which may be a different flavor than yours?*

It's a good question. Actually, our newest program has a lot of customizable components to it. We start by evaluating the school's current process, and then we review that with management and offer our recommendations. We'll offer our suggestions about what can stay and what we think needs to go, and what absolutely has to go,

because it's either non-compliant or it's going to get them showcased on national TV somehow. Within those customizable components, we'll retain the best of what they're already doing. But for the most part, I'd say 80 percent of what we're delivering is our new, updated content.

*Traditionally sales training has been about tools, objections, closes—learn the script and we'll put people in front of you and you just follow the script from A-Z. Is that what you do?*

Not at all. In fact, we say, "scrap the scripts" for the most part. I think originally there was a good intention behind scripts. The thinking was if we

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keep people to a script, they're not going to say things that are unethical or illegal. In fact, we're finding that people did go off script, because scripts don't work in every situation. So if an admissions professional is responsible for meeting certain numbers, enrolling a certain number of students, or if they have their own sense of pride in their work and they want to be successful, they end up adding their own content or pushing harder on those things that they've

been taught to do. It ends up getting them into more trouble.

Our training involves what we call a sales lattice. The idea is that a lattice offers guardrails, so people aren't going to get into trouble by falling off the edge. However, it allows them that space in between to go a little to the left, a little to the right, a little faster, a little slower, depending on the student they're working with. So there's flexibility within the framework to allow them to have real, meaningful conversations without getting into trouble.

*But as an admissions director, I want predictable results. It sounds like in your version, I'm leaving some of the decision making to the admissions person, rather than telling them how it should be.*

Actually, the admissions professional is the one who is working with the student while management is looking at the numbers or conversions in a report. It

is essential that we provide the front line team with tools to make the best decisions when no one is watching. Interestingly, I think some schools out there have actually stopped selling completely, and the pendulum has swung all the way to the other side. This can't continue if organizations are going to survive. The ideal answer is a place somewhere in the middle. We can be efficient, effective and ethical all at the same time. We train on the four key skill sets that we believe make strong admissions professionals. Those include product knowledge, sales, people skills and attitude. So sales is still an important element; however, it's not necessarily as important as other components.

*Why don't you take us through each one of those components?*

**The first component, product knowledge, is essential.** I'm talking



**Dr. Jean Norris** began her own educational pursuit in a 10-month medical assisting program. In the 25 years since, she has served as a faculty member, dean and senior admissions and marketing administrator at for-profit and traditional higher education institutions. She is a leading advocate for

the highest level of ethics in working with students. Jean is a licensed NLP™ practitioner and developed the *7/8ths System™*, a collection of training workshops and programs designed in conjunction with her Australian Partners, *The Right Mind*, to connect with today's students (and each other) in effective and ethical ways.

A key part of the *7/8ths System™* is **EnrollMatch™**—the ethical enrollment process. **EnrollMatch™** infuses extensive self-discovery throughout the program. As participants understand their unique strengths and opportunities, the following modules bring together best practices in communication, relationship building, NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP)®, student counseling, sales, leadership, motivation and MORE! Participants also learn to use *The Lattice Framework®* to stay compliant yet with enough

flexibility to connect with today's students in the most **ethical** and **effective** ways.

Jean shares her passion for the career college sector through speaking at conferences, serving as a commencement speaker, and publishing articles on the topics of ethics and admission practices. Since 2004, she's been writing about ethics in recruitment and admissions and has recently been interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. Her works have also appeared in *The Journal of College Admission*, *The Link*, *Career Education Review*, and *Career College Central*.

Jean's dissertation research has been widely referenced as one of the few national studies on the topic of ethics in admissions. It is appropriately titled, *"The Moral Judgment of Admission Counselors at For-Profit and Not-for-Profit Baccalaureate-Degree Granting Colleges and Universities."*

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way beyond understanding your own school's programs, the faculty backgrounds, passing rates, placement rates and all of that. Admissions professionals of the future have to have product knowledge outside of their own schools, including knowing something about the other options prospective students might be considering. Is it the military, the community college or the state university? A prepared professional admissions rep, in order to do the job well, must understand and be educated about what those other options are.

In the past, admissions training never included this material. The thinking was, don't talk about the competition, just stay away from that subject. But I think the ethical thing for us to do is to help our students make an informed decision, even if that means the student does not choose our school. And the only way we can do that is to be informed about what other options they might be considering.

**The second component is sales skills.** I believe everybody is selling every day, so I don't think people got in trouble with the Government Accountability Office by selling; I think they got in trouble by doing unethical and fraudulent things. There's a big difference. So when some folks say, "Oh, we can't sell anymore, we can't use that word anymore," I think we're swinging too far over to the other side. When we talk about selling, we're talking about things like helping that student through discovery to understand things, to understand where your programs might fit, to conduct effective questioning. Even trial closes and concepts that we've used for a long time are still part of the process in terms of being a good admissions rep.

Those first two skill sets are important, but they are not as critical as the

next two—**people skills** and attitude.

When we talk about people skills, we're talking about someone's ability to connect with another person. When you think about great admissions people, they're the ones who have that natural ability.

Students like them and it's easy to build a rapport with them. They're usually very outgoing and

popular on campus, and they just seem to have that innate ability to connect with others. In our program, we actually teach people how to do that. So even if you're not born with it, we can teach you how to read clues from other people to understand students better.

Beyond reading other people, we also work on how to use the new information we've gained to help the student better understand the information and build amazing rapport with the admissions rep.

We also take our reps through a lot of self-discovery exercises to understand how they communicate, what their barriers are, what some of the signs are that they're giving off. Once they have a better understanding of themselves, and a better way to read people, then they have the ability to use these tools to really form a meaningful relationship with their potential students. This is a key piece, because we know that many students are not as trusting as they used to be. So people skills actually carry a lot of weight in the mix.

**The final component is attitude.**

Does the individual want to bring their best effort forward on every single phone call and in every face-to-face interaction? It's a choice, at the end of the day. If someone is just totally wiped out because they've done five interviews in a day and they've talked to 25 students, do they

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have the energy to keep it up with each and every person? Do they choose to use all their knowledge and skill with each and every student?

Those are the four key components that we focus on. Another big part

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of the program involves using information from the best of communication, understanding how people buy, and Neurolinguistic Programming. We pull all of these

pieces together into a program that actually has measurable results.

*Don't you hire for attitude, not train for attitude?*

I think there definitely is a way to look for a certain profile of someone who has the right attitude. But we can still teach elements of that. Even if somebody has a great attitude, we can help him enhance it. If they have a bad attitude, that's a behavioral issue that we can help them to change.

*When the current controversy with the GAO started, you and I talked about the fact that many of the admissions reps that the GAO visited simply didn't believe in the mission of the school. They couldn't look the student in the eye and say it's going to cost this much to go to school here. How does that fit into this equation?*

That's a great question. It's impossible to change someone's behavior until you change his beliefs. People will act in certain ways based on what they value, what's important to them. One thing we look at in our program is understanding organizational fit. Is the

admissions profession the right one for somebody? Oftentimes I'm not sure that schools actually help the individuals who they're hiring to understand what it takes to be a successful admissions rep. If the organization has certain values, they should be in line with their values. If not, then that person should not be working at that institution, because that's when we end up having problems later on. If that rep cannot sell because they don't believe in the organization, it creates tremendous stress for all parties and it's just not a good fit. Organizations need to start looking at the kinds of people that they're hiring to make sure that there's value alignment.

*One thing I learned in my years of accompanying sales trainers around the country is that there is a need to train admissions people to believe in themselves, that they can actually do the training and use the techniques being offered. That seems to be almost as important as training in the actual techniques.*

That goes back to attitude. If you've ever read the book *Soft Sell* by Tim Connor, a big part of his message is that attitude is 50 percent of someone's success in sales. So their belief in themselves, the energy that they bring to the job, their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical strength—all these are components of the foundation. If you don't have that foundation, then the other things really don't matter.

*Now that's something, again, that you almost have to hire for, because you really can't teach that in two or three days of training can you?*

I'm not a miracle worker. But what we can do in three days of training is to create awareness. If we can help

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people start to understand themselves better, and get a sense of what their strengths are, where their opportunities are, is this a fit—within those three days, we can help people figure out if this is the right job for them, and if they're working at a place that is in alignment with their values. They'll also understand what their barriers to communication are. They'll learn a lot about new tools that they can use and they'll learn ethical practices. Again, selling is not a bad thing, but there are some old practices that have been overused and don't work anymore. So we give them new tools to use instead.

We also reinforce our training, meaning it's a comprehensive program. We offer Train the Trainer programs, in which we train key people at different campuses to actually continue the training and to onboard new employees with the same training. We offer quarterly webinars and e-learning courses for people to continue their training. We have a yearly review of a campus that's partnering with us. For a small fee throughout the year we will make sure that their training is updated. I think that's one of the things that got this sector into trouble to begin with, is that training became outdated. As government regulations continue to come down and best practices continue to be shaped, we will integrate those into our training, and through webinars, e-learning and Train the Trainer courses we will send participating schools updated pieces of the curriculum to share with their staff.

*In your updated curriculum, do you specifically address the issue of the negative press that for-profit schools have gotten recently, and how to deal with that?*

Our approach, under the umbrella of product knowledge, is to do extensive

training in all sectors, to help the employee understand the unique role that each type of institution plays in higher education. So, what is a state

university, what is their purpose, what is their mission?

What is a community college, what is a career college? We also train outside the career school industry, so helping large universities to understand career

colleges is also part of what we do. Our training is built in a way that leads to broader awareness of all higher education options.

Specifically relating to the recent negative press, we do talk extensively about the things that are going on in the government and discuss why these things might be happening. If an organization has been part of the controversy, we discuss elements of what got them into trouble to begin with, and what they might do to avoid it in the future.

*That's good for the admissions person, but what level of candor is used in the admissions interview? If a student comes in and says, "I've been reading all about these schools and I'm not so sure about you guys," how much do I as an admissions rep disclose, or do I just blame the guy down the street?*

People aren't stupid. Today's consumers are much more savvy than we typically give them credit for. There is news out there that they're reading on the Internet or hearing from other people. If somebody comes forward in an admissions interview with something negative they've heard, that issue needs to be addressed right then and there.

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The fact that the student is even in your admissions office shows that they care enough to learn more about what's going on. The admissions professional needs to address that student's concern, and to the best of their ability help that student to understand what's happened.

*Let's talk about another scenario: If a student comes to an admissions interview and says they want to study in a paralegal program, and your school only teaches medical, what do you train people to do?*

We spend considerable time teaching admission reps how to conduct an extensive new approach to exploration called the Student Counseling Approach (SCA). This involves helping the prospective student clearly understand their desired state, current state and the

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gap in between. As they explore with the student the options to close the gap, the choice becomes clearer. If a student is looking for something that the school doesn't offer, we suggest

helping that student find a resource that does offer what they want.

*Are we at the point where the admissions rep can actually pick up the phone and call his colleague at another school and say hey, I've got a paralegal prospect for you?*

I think that's going to be an individual choice by different organizations. My approach is to train admissions staff to help the student understand what their next steps should be, whether it's with your school or not. A particular school may decide hey, they want paralegal and

we don't offer that, help the student understand what their options might be and follow up with that student as they're checking out the school that offers the curriculum they want. That is ethical, and it is great customer service. Plus, if that student decides he doesn't want that particular curriculum, then perhaps you have an opportunity. Either way, we've done the right thing by helping that student find a direction. Those are the moments that will actually make a difference in terms of the perception of the sector.

*How do you explain that to management? We've got X number of enrollments and oh, by the way, we made three referrals to our competitors this week....*

My view is that people are going to shop around anyway. They're going to look at their other options. If you convince someone to take your program and it's not what he wants, he's only going to drop out. I think management needs to take a new look at how they're measuring things in the process.

*What are the new measurements? Isn't it always going to be about the numbers?*

I think in this industry it's not going to be all about the numbers, but the numbers are important. It needs to be more about quality than quantity, however. I think that things have been out of balance for a while. We've been riding this wonderful wave of all these students coming to our schools and many of them doing extremely well, campuses popping up all over the place, and I think for some schools the numbers became more important than the faces behind those numbers. Organizations are going to need to make sure that they are in balance with quantity and quality.

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*What else do we need to do in terms of effective management of the training process?*

At one point you asked me if we needed a new type of admissions person, if the admissions folks of old can adapt to this new paradigm. I've always believed that there are many great admissions professionals out there who can adapt but it's going to be very difficult. The behaviors are so ingrained it's hard for some people to step outside and see that there's any other way to recruit or do an admissions interview. The folks who can't change may have to go, and I think as we start to bring in new admissions professionals, we need to look at different skill sets, including some of those that I mentioned earlier: The ability to be an exceptional communicator and to build a rapport with people and to have a level of judgment. In the past, those things weren't as important because admissions interviews were scripted. It was all about tenacity, and can you make 200 calls a day and stay on script. I think what we're looking at in this new paradigm is people who don't need a script, but who can make judgment calls along the way to make sure that they're both ethical and effective.

*With the demise of "safe harbors" on incentive compensation, how are we going to motivate these new reps?*

The assumption there is that everybody is motivated by money. The type of person that we need in this job is not necessarily someone who is strictly motivated by money. It may be that we need a different level of counseling professionals—someone perhaps with training and a degree in the areas of guidance counseling, youth counseling,

etc. Then we offer them a competitive base salary along with clear expectations of performance.

*If by chance you suddenly owned a large school organization and had permission to do anything you wanted to do with admissions and training, what would you do?*

If I were in charge of admissions and training at my own school, I think hiring people who have a shared value structure with

my organization would be first and foremost. A lot of what we saw in terms of the GAO, the people coming

forward were disgruntled employees. That goes back to organizational fit. Somewhere along the line, things did not match up. I think it is critical to find people at the right level who share the values of the organization.

Secondly, I would not be looking to recycle old-timers. I would probably look outside the sector and bring in people who have the skill set this sector needs to address the shifting paradigm, who we could train in product knowledge and sales. The other elements are actually more important to their success than the product knowledge and the sales skills. I would also say hold them accountable.

*What does accountability look like in your organization?*

We probably can't be looking solely at the number of starts or conversion rates, but it's essential to have understood performance expectations. In any customer service job there's an expectation of performance, and people are held accountable. If the goal

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is meeting our students' needs, then we should be doing surveys or customer service evaluations. If the goal is the resolution of student problems or fulfilling student requests for information, the measurement is going to be that students chose to come to our school because we helped them figure things out.

One measurement tool that's fairly simple to implement is mystery shop-

ping. In addition to training we also offer our clients the option to have their reps mystery shopped, to make sure that those reps are actually putting their training into practice and going through the steps that they're taught. If it turns out that admissions reps aren't following the process, then that's a problem.

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**Career  
Education**  
REVIEW

*Edited by Judi Ditzler.*

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