

Career College CENTRAL



SHORTING OUT

Was the Department of Education conspiring with short sellers to bring down for-profit schools?

PLAYING FAVORITES

The current administration's actions favor community colleges

POLITICAL FRIENDS AND FOES

For-profit schools gain allies in election landslide


TREADING WATER

The Department of Education is in over its head in determining measurements for new rules

MORAL REASONING


Another measure of ethical behavior in admissions

By Dr. Jean Norris, Norton | Norris



In 2009, I was asked to predict what the future of admissions and recruitment practices would look like. My thoughts were captured under the heading of “The Handcuffs will be Loosened” and explained how admissions reps would be free to “scrap the scripts” and have meaningful conversations with prospective students. Well, I was a bit off on the timing, and I surely didn’t see the catalyst for change in the form of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation. But perhaps it’s this type of clearing event that will really spur career colleges and schools to let go of outdated sales approaches and adopt more effective means of recruiting students. In other words, there could be some good that comes out of this event.

Now don’t get me wrong. Those who want to attack the sector will continue their efforts, but it’s not like we haven’t given them ammunition. Even worse, we have little data to push back with when it comes to proving ethical behavior. The GAO conducted mystery shops using a nonrandom sample of 15 schools to come up with limited findings they are now advocating to be universal. This got me thinking about the research out there (or lack of) to support the claim that fraudulent and unethical behavior in career colleges is simply an anomaly rather than a rampant issue. That’s when I decided to dust off my dissertation research on the moral judgment of admissions reps at for-profit and not-for-profit colleges and universities. I think it’s time to share the findings and recommendations of this national study to combat the “evidence” against career colleges.



First, let me provide you a brief overview of the study, entitled "The Moral Judgment of Admission Counselors at For-Profit and Not-for-Profit Baccalaureate Degree Granting Colleges and Universities," with a special focus on data points related to the ethical dimension of admissions representatives.

Purpose of the study

Given the continued scrutiny of the higher education sector, this research study sought to understand if admissions reps could be trusted to ethically balance the needs of the student and the organization. To answer this and other questions, this national study was conducted in May 2004 to measure the moral judgment (a component of ethical decision making) of admissions representatives across the United States. The moral judgment score was then compared to other professions, and between admissions representatives counselors working in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. Since age, gender and education level were also shown to have an impact on moral judgment, these variables were compared as a whole and between the two sectors.



Theory of moral judgment

The work of James Rest is based on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg became famous in the early 1970s claiming that people progressed in moral judgment through a series of stages. Moral reasoning represents the "... cognitive process that an individual goes through in order to reach a moral decision based on her or his perceptions of morality." In *The Kohlberg Legacy for the Helping Professions*, Gielen explains the cognitive moral thinking process in the following passage:

Moral thinking is said to develop from an initial concern with the physical and hedonistic consequences of one's actions, to an anticipation of, and identification with interpersonal and societal expectations, to a level where persons have worked out their own moral principle. This progression is assumed to be universal and sequential. Each person goes through the stages and levels in the same order, but the speed and endpoint of development may differ considerably from person to person and from culture to culture. The focus of Kohlberg's six stages is upon the structure or form of moral reasoning and not upon the culturally and personally variable content of moral decision making.

The six stages of moral development are grouped into three levels including preconventional, conventional and postconventional. The higher stage judgments are considered more desirable than lower stage judgments according to both cognitive and moral criteria.

Although there is debate on the relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior, several researchers agree that moral reasoning is an essential element in ethical decision-making.

Moral reasoning does not suggest that one group acts more ethically than another, as this variable is only one factor in determining whether or not moral behavior actually occurs in a given situation. According to Rest & Narvaez, there are up to four processes going on that lead to moral behavior.

Sample

The population studied was comprised of individuals currently employed as admissions representatives (or related titles) in a United States, baccalaureate degree granting private college or university. Participants for the not-for-profit sample were current members of the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) as of August 2003. The for-profit sample consisted of admissions representatives employed as of September 2003

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by a publicly traded, proprietary, national university volunteering to represent this segment. Researchers contacted 2,371 individuals to ascertain their interest in the study. Of the 335 who requested to participate, 138 returned their surveys by the deadline for a return rate of 41 percent equally representative of for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

Respondents were asked to provide their names and telephone numbers if they were willing to participate in a follow up telephone interview. Telephone interviews yielded 11 participants (n=1 for the for-profit sector and n=10 for the not-for-profit sector). In sum, eight percent, or 11 out of 138 respondents were interviewed by telephone.

Data collection methods

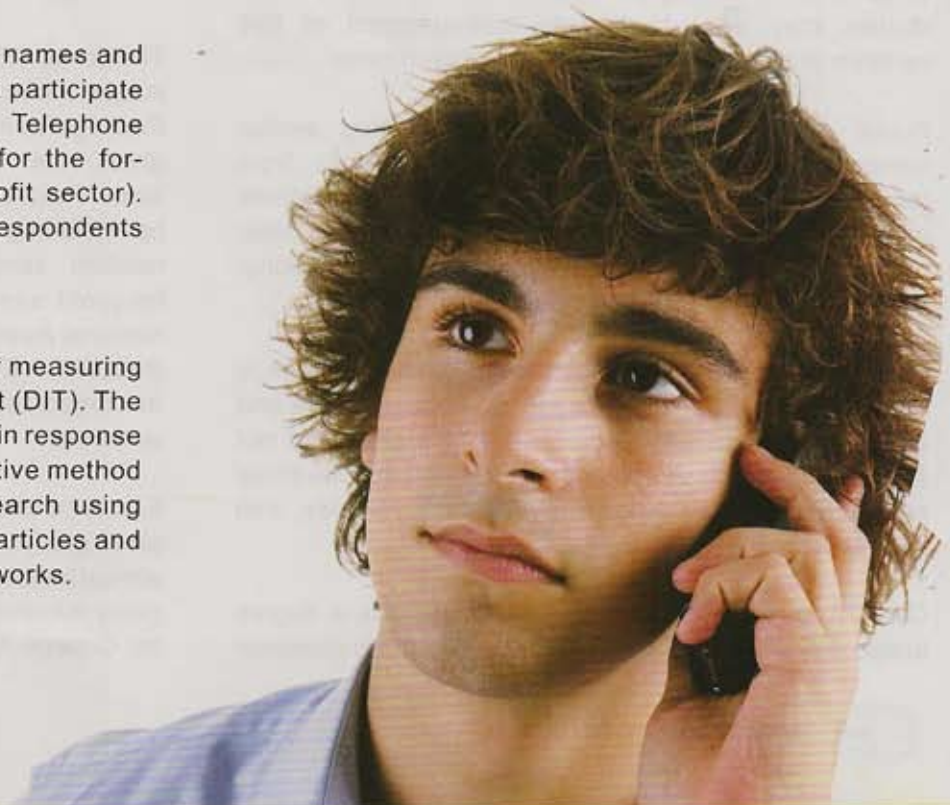
The most popular and widely used tool for measuring moral judgment is the Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT was developed by James Rest in 1974 in response to the lengthy, labor-intensive, and subjective method of interviewing used by Kohlberg. Research using the DIT numbers well over 400 published articles and books as well as numerous unpublished works.

The DIT measures the second component in Rest's Four Component Model – moral judgment. At least five professions and the general adult population have been studied with this tool. It is estimated that half a million participants have already been involved in research using the DIT (Walker). The tool was in need of updating, however, and the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2) was developed. The DIT2 was a better instrument as it provides stronger support for validity criteria, purges fewer participants to retain a wider range of overall scores, shortens the tests, and has clearer instructions. This was the first study of the admission representative/counselor profession using the DIT or the DIT2.

Findings

Findings from the DIT2 show that there is no significant difference in moral judgment score at a .05 level between admissions representatives working in for-profit and not-for-profit colleges and universities. Although the sample size from the for-profit sector was small (n=9) compared to the not-for-profit sample (n=129), the return rate was 41 percent and 43 percent respectively.

When comparing the total sample with other professions, admissions representatives have a higher mean moral judgment score than the general adult population and score higher than some professions/groups. Individual comparisons of moral judgment scores of the not-for-profit and for-profit groups to age, gender, and education level did not show any significant relationships.



Qualitative data collected in the telephone interviews show concern by participants on changes in the admissions counseling profession over time. A majority of those interviewed spoke of increased competition and the pressure to meet enrollment goals. Most of the respondents expressed that they did not practice unethical behaviors, but are concerned with others who may. Finally, a majority of those surveyed spoke of a lack of understanding and recognition of the admissions counseling profession within their institutions and the general public.

Conclusions

Within the limitations of this study, certain conclusions can be drawn. First, individuals working as admissions representatives in for-profit and not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree granting, private colleges or universities possess a higher level of moral judgment than the general adult population. Secondly, no relationship exists between the admissions representative moral judgment scores and the type (for-profit or not-for-profit) of college or university where they are employed.

Implications and recommendations

This study was limited to admissions representatives or a related job title at for-profit and not-for-profit, baccalaureate-degree granting colleges and universities in the private sector. The admissions representative/counselor job title was selected with the assumption that this position worked most closely with prospective students and/or families in making an enrollment decision. Future studies may want to include measurement of this variable to provide evidence for this assumption.

Public colleges and universities are facing similar competitive challenges and revenue shortfalls from federal and state budget cuts. Comparing the admissions representatives working in the public sector to their counterparts in the private sector may offer additional insight into the profession overall.

Several studies using the DIT or DIT2 show evidence of a relationship between the moral judgment score and age, gender, and education level. This study did not show relationships to any of these variables. This study represents an equal division of males and females, with a mean age of 39.

Over 76 percent of respondents also possess a degree above the Bachelor's degree level. It is the experience

of this researcher that this profile is not necessarily reflective of the typical admissions counselor. It is possible that nonrandom sample selection had an impact on these results. Perhaps respondents represent only those willing to complete a fairly complicated and time-intensive survey. This study may add to the body of literature in a meaningful way by showing alternative findings and encouraging further exploration of this, and other, professions.

The descriptive research design employed in this study does not intend to address questions of a causal nature. Since moral judgment is only one factor in ethical decision-making, other studies may employ an alternative research design in exploring Rest's Four Component

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Model, including moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral character. Other research may examine societal influences on ethical behavior including motivational techniques used with admissions counselors.

The for-profit education sector was represented by a single, national, publicly-traded, for-profit university. Findings cannot be generalized to the entire sector given the small and nonrepresentative sample size. Future studies may want to expand this study by including other for-profit providers and utilizing random sampling techniques. Relatedly, the not-for-profit sample comprised current members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Expanding studies beyond membership in this organization may prove worthwhile for comparative purposes.

Evidence of conflict between the for-profit and not-for-profit groups may be due to misconceptions related to ethical behavior. Several organizations do not allow for-profit membership, including the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). In fact,

recent efforts to allow for-profit membership to NACAC were voted down in April 2002. One reason for this decision was a perception that individuals from these institutions have differing ethical standards and goals.

This study finds no support for this belief. Admission-counselors working in the for-profit sector showed no statistically significant difference in moral judgment scores than their not-for-profit counterparts. Professional organizations can use this study as a means to explore ethics in admissions counseling further, including examining other components of moral behavior. In fact, NACAC identifies ethics and professional practice as one of their strategic plan goals. Education within and outside the profession may lead to improvements in serving students and families, serving the needs of admissions representatives in all sectors, and increasing recognition of the admissions counseling profession.

Final thoughts

Perhaps studies of this nature can serve as a catalyst for further research. If we gain a greater understanding of ethical behavior in the admissions profession and the organizations where individuals are employed, we can elevate our service to students and their families. Although I won't be bold enough to claim that these results can be generalized to EVERY admissions rep out there. I'm hopeful we can at least cast some doubt around the assumption all for-profit career colleges employ unethical reps.

As someone who began an educational career in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program, I owe a lot to this sector. I won't sit still and watch others defame the great work and contributions of our colleges and schools – at least not without a fight. 🙌



Dr. Jean Norris is a Managing Partner with Norton|Norris Inc., a firm that specializes in Tactical Enrollment Management™. Norris has worked in admissions and marketing for more than 20 years in both career colleges and traditional colleges and universities, including Robert Morris College, Argosy Education Group, University of St. Francis and Deltak.

