

Ethical Decision Making in College Admissions

(Literature Review)

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### Ethical Decision Making in College Admissions

When it comes to the college admissions process, students and families engage in rigorous preparation that will lead to one of the most impactful transitions in a person's life. As high school students begin the process of discerning their next stage in life, many consider the possibility of furthering their learning in higher education. Amidst the process of demonstrated interest and college recruitment, application decisions are constantly made by admissions professionals. In this literature review, the process of ethical decision making in the admissions profession will be explored and analyzed to better understand the moral dynamics throughout the college admissions process. Through the history and commitment to the NACAC core values, there has been an increase in admissions professionalization in higher education built through trusted relational connections, informed by moral judgment and empowered by the moral cultivation of ethical decision making.

#### **History and Commitment to NACAC Cores Values**

For a profession to thrive in a changing and competitive society, there is the need to commit to core values that are refined, instilled, and developed throughout its history. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) has an established code of ethics through the NACAC's Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP), but they can often be abused through commission, exaggeration, coerced strategies, and financial aid awarding that is self-serving to the institution but a disservice to students as well as the profession. "The SPGP is a living document that adapts to changes in the ways that students are recruited, counseled and enrolled. When new ideas lead to a change in our professional practices, it is the SPGP that helps us determine how to respond" (Anderson & Weede, 2011, p. 6). It exists as behavioral norms consisting of shared beliefs, expected behaviors, and desired guidelines that

serve professional performance, permissible actions, and choice that adheres to an ideal of service (Hodum & James, 2010). Admissions professionals' motivation and development empowers the establishment of codes of conduct and ethics that inform behavioral norms.

Workers' profession is an occupational group that consists of knowledge, dedication, ethics, and intention (Newton, 2016). Kahneman (2011) suggests remembering this rule: "intuition cannot be trusted in the absence of stable regularities in the environment" (p. 241). As a result, moral boundaries for the practices of recruiting and admitting students should not be crossed in its autonomous nature. According to Hodum and James (2010),

these boundaries restrict the autonomy they have in how they represent their institution (*Institutional Misrepresentation, Stopping Short of Full Disclosure, and Seeking an Unfair Advantage*), how they treat students and colleagues (*Disregard for Fair Treatment of Others, Dishonest Recruitment Practices, Breach of Confidentiality, Institutional Self-Centeredness, and Offering Enticements*) and how they handle fiscal matters (*Inappropriate Compensation*) (p. 334).

Throughout the admissions profession, self-regulation is needed to uphold the behavioral norms as a marker for professional autonomy with the expectation of progressing toward the professionalization in admissions duties and structures (Hodum & James, 2010). Normative patterns have emerged in the admissions profession through the codes of ethics from NACAC and AACRAO and finally, individual characteristics are a personal source of control in comparison to social and institutional control (Hodum & James, 2010). Since 1937, promoting ethical admission practices has historically been a cornerstone for NACAC and service nearly 16,000 members who are known to be a trusted source of ethics with the college admissions

process (“NACAC Adopts New SPGP,” 2017, p. 21). These ethical rules regulate how admissions professionals conduct themselves and represent their institutions.

Committing to core values, according to Anderson and Weede (2011), in their article, “Core Values as Our Compass,” suggests that individual practices are like proverbial trees within an elegant forest. For the SPGP, there is a primary focus on six overarching Core Values: Professionalism, Education, Fairness and Equity, Social Responsibility, Collaboration, and Trust,” which helps guide institutions’ decision making process across three controversial issues: need-blind vs. need-sensitive, independent counselors, and the May 1<sup>st</sup> candidate’s reply date (Anderson & Weede, 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, the SPGP “provides clear ethical principles as well as procedures for implementing and monitoring them. It protects students from unethical recruitment practices and shields institutions from unfair competition” (“NACAC Adopts New SPGP,” 2017, p. 21). These core values and policies are in place to prevent conflicting conditions and are enforced by an ethical decision-making process that considers the “acquisition of skills requires a regular environment, an adequate opportunity to practice, and rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 416). Throughout the course of an admissions cycle, NACAC seeks to develop leaders and professionals who raise the commitment to admissions professionalization.

### **Commitment to Admissions Professionalization**

Committing to admissions professionalization consists of the development of professions who claim a knowledge of an art, dedication to service to clients, dedication to service to the public, professional creed or code of ethics, and intention to make a living at what they do (Newton, 2013). According to Hodum and James (2010), in the article “An Observation of Normative Structure for College Admission and Recruitment Officers” published by the *Journal*

*of Higher Education*, there are several existing norms and influencing factors for admissions officers through NACAC and AACRAO, which is progressing the occupation toward professionalization. There is a call for professional standards considering the trend of admissions marketing officers whose primary concerns are with enrollment numbers. Through the survey instrument, the College Admission and Recruiting Behaviors Inventory (CARBI) resulted in 341 useable replies with a 39.7 percent response rate and evaluate broad categories of values such as “financial integrity, honesty, openness, fairness, institutional commitment, preparedness, accountability, respect, personal integrity, and caring for others” (Hodum & James, 2010, p. 322). Understanding the codes of conduct and ethics upheld in the admissions profession, behavioral norms are evaluated for awareness, regulation, and development.

These admissions professionals provide the most support to students as they transition into college and are motivated by “making an impact, working independently, and developing counseling skills” (Hodum & James, 2010, p. 318). Their professionalization is dependent upon their development through “(a) an extensive period of training and socialization; (b) the possession of a systematic body of theory; (c) the formation of professional associations; and (d) the existence of a code of conduct” (as cited in Hodum & James, 2010, p. 318). In the admissions professional, there is a need for the establishment of codes of conduct and ethics that provides governing behavior and obligations in the profession. Hodum and James (2010) suggests that, enforced professional codes of ethics serve many functions: (a) they ensure clients that professional services will be rendered in accordance with high standards and moral conduct; (b) they assure the public that the professional is serving the public interest and should continue to enjoy public trust, confidence, and support; (c) they provide a code of uniform rules and behavioral standards by which members are informed of acceptable

behavior in order that their conduct can be properly regulated; and (d) they help maintain the integrity of professional organizations and protect professionals from falling into disrepute (p. 318).

Ultimately, counselors and admissions officers carry the unique perspective as stewards of the college admissions process, keepers of the SPGP code of ethics, and architects of the maze of discovering the right institutional fit (Patterson, 2007). According to Newton (2013),

The professional of any kind is committed to quality and integrity: he or she is obliged to practice the art at its most advanced state, defend the honor of the profession (in part by helpful to weed out the dishonorable members) and to advance the state of the art through research, writing and teaching (p. 41).

However, competition between institutions creates a conflicting reality of business in the admissions profession where overselling can become problematic considering fraud (Silber, 2012). From a behaviorist perspective, “behavior is controlled by cause and effect” or stimuli, “set of causes, or response, specific effect” where the competitive nature of the business could affect the quality of service (Wilkens, 2011, p. 60). Therefore, having a relational approach to the profession can lead to trusted relational connection rather than transactional interaction.

### **Built Through Trusted Relational Connections**

Building trusted relational connections through the college admissions process is foundational to the commitment to admissions professionalization. According to research conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017), “counselors have helped high school students find their way to college, sparking the college dreams of many generations. Yet, college and university enrollment leaders know little about this group of professionals and their role in

college planning today” (p. 2). Therefore, college admissions counselors are critical to the process as they commit to stewarding the students and territories that they serve.

One of the ways that college admissions professionals build trust within a community is by being a relational influence that leads to a leadership impact. According to Northouse (2016), leadership is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). The relationship between the admissions counselors and prospective students consists of a leader-member exchange (LMX) where the exchange evolves throughout the process from stranger to acquaintance and eventually a partnership (Northouse, 2016). According to Shere (2014), community-based organization (CBO) college counselors model this relationship well as a part of NACAC who emphasizes

the importance of connection to community, awareness of community context and acquaintance with community outreach services throughout its Statement of Principles of Good Practice, Statement on Counselor Competencies and Statement on the Pre-college Guidance and Counseling Role of the School Counselor (p. 29).

Through understanding the community context, the backing of NACAC, and the outreach in low access communities, admissions professionals have the opportunity to become a trusted guide in an entire community. When a partnership starts to form trust is established and interactions that are often transactional transforms into relational connections.

Those relational connections in the college admissions process can often become transactional considering the dynamics of customer relationship management (CRM) that consists of three primary business practices: contact management (touch points and information), campaign management (proactive and reactive), and data-driven decision making (capturing, enhancing, and analyzing data) (Campbell & Roberts, 2007). According to Campbell and

Roberts (2007), when an “institution commits to a CRM philosophy, it will forever change how you do business and how you view your ‘customer’” (Campbell & Roberts, 2007, p. 82).

Through a servant leadership approach to admissions, admissions professionals become leaders in communities who seek to serve as the focus in leading. By committing to a servant leadership approach that embodies seven virtuous constructs: agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service, admissions professionals can become foundation builders who build environments of trust and an open door for clarity in communication throughout the college admissions process (Patterson, 2003). As a result, committing to the professionalization through a servant leadership perspective the SPGP is empowered to serve students and families.

### **Moral Judgment that Informs the Admissions Professionals**

Throughout the admissions profession, ethical behavior involves ethical decision making that is measured by moral judgment. According to Norris (2005), in the article “Pawns or Professionals: The 21st Century Admission Counselor” published by the *Journal of College Admission*, moral judgment admission counselor professionals were compared to other professionals. Through quantitative data gathered by the Defining Issues Test (DIT), “a labor-intensive and subjective method of interviewing,” age, gender, and education-levels were considered as impactful variables that were explored and through interviews it was clear that there was an increase in competition and pressure to meet enrollment goals (as cited in Norris, 2005, p. 10). “Individuals working as admissions counselors 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” (Norris, 2005, p. 11). Overall, the role of an admissions counselor and their moral judgment plays a vital role in the health of institutions in higher education as well as students’ decision-making process.



In higher education, NACAC provides high moral standards to enforce ethical decision-making as “individuals are faced with many psychological devices for disengaging moral control and may serve profit over the need of people” (as cited in Norris, 2005, p. 12). When admissions counselors’ superiors don’t pressure or incentivize reaching enrollment goals, admissions counselors are able positions themselves closely with students and family seeking to make enrollment decisions. According to Kahneman (2011), there are two systems of decision making: “the intuitive System 1, which does the fast thinking, and the effortful and slower System 2, which does the slow thinking, monitors System 1 and maintains control as best it can within its limited resources” (p. 408). Being able to have the moral judgment to leverage these two decision making systems, admissions professionals are also able to enlist Newton’s (2013) ethical framework, ADAPT: attention (conditional alert that causes concern), dialogue (disseminated information through communal conversation forming public opinion), assumptions (rationale of what ought to be done), proposals (proposed idea that becomes implemented action), and test (reviewed decision process that leads to an effective result). Having a greater understanding of ethical behavior through moral judgment explores organizational dynamics while moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character evaluate the individual.

Finally, Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral judgment articulates the “individual’s progress through stages in moral development begins with the fear of punishment orientation and peaks with the practice of universal ethical practices” (as cited in Norris, 2005, p. 10). Rest created a tool consisting of three schemas: personal interest, maintaining norms and post-conventional thinking, which is the measurement of tacit knowledge that is more valuable since it is expressed knowledge that drives decision making (as cited in Norris, 2005). Moral judgment

is one factor observed in ethical decision-making as a part of Rest's Four Component Model, which also includes moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character. When admissions counselor professionals serve students with positive moral judgment, the service they provide to families and students becomes meaningful and positively represents the profession while unethical behavior negatively impacts higher education as a whole.

### **Moral Cultivation that Empowers Ethical Decision Making**

In society, people have the freedom to develop their standards and ethics of morality, which empowers them to form their behavior and decisions. Eventually decisions will be made with the freedom in their own process, but Newton's (2016) decision procedure for ethical dilemmas is remembered through the acronym DISORDER: definition of the dilemma, inquiry to obtain all necessary information, sorting out the stakeholders, options and outcomes, rights and rules, determination and decision, evaluation of effects, and review and reconsider. These decisions are based on the interests and welfare of the client that is derived based off of useful information from various sources of evidence independently examined, priming that influences action (Kahneman, 2011), and professional ethics anchored by the obligation to the client (Newton, 2013). Throughout the changing nature of the higher education, the admissions profession becomes dynamic and challenge requiring the need for mindfulness through moral cultivation that empowers ethical decision making.

According to Kamble and Kumar (2017), in the article "Mindfulness and Re-perceiving for an Ethical Workplace: An Interdisciplinary Approach" published by the *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, mindfulness and re-perceiving cultivates moral spontaneity as a result of James Rest's Four Component Model of ethical decision-making: moral intention, moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral character. Mindfulness and re-perceiving cultivate paying

attention to present moments, which develops the capacity to think and act with more objectively with consideration of self and others (as cited in Kamble & Kumar, 2017). Ethics and morality drive ethical behavior and practices at individual, organizational, and societal levels that must be addressed for ethical decision-making throughout an expanding globalize workplace.

Moral intention or motivation consists of the importance of a person’s value priorities guides attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions and with mindfulness, increases awareness of self and others, decreases problematic emotions, and strengthens morality-supporting emotions (Kamble & Kumar, 2017). While moral awareness is the sensitivity to the welfare of others as well as builds awareness of the consequences of actions and with mindfulness, people are able to explore, experiment, compare, discern, and enhances decisions by creating harmful and beneficial lines of action. In addition, moral judgment formulates a moral course of actions by discerning harmful actions, discarding lesser actions, and interpreting actions of well-being and with mindfulness, options and opinions are formed through the clarity of a 360-degree view of moral demands. Finally, moral character represents the moral implementation that takes courage and skill amidst adversities and with mindfulness, decision-makers are able to re-perceive fear and anxiety and observe in a compassionate curious manner.

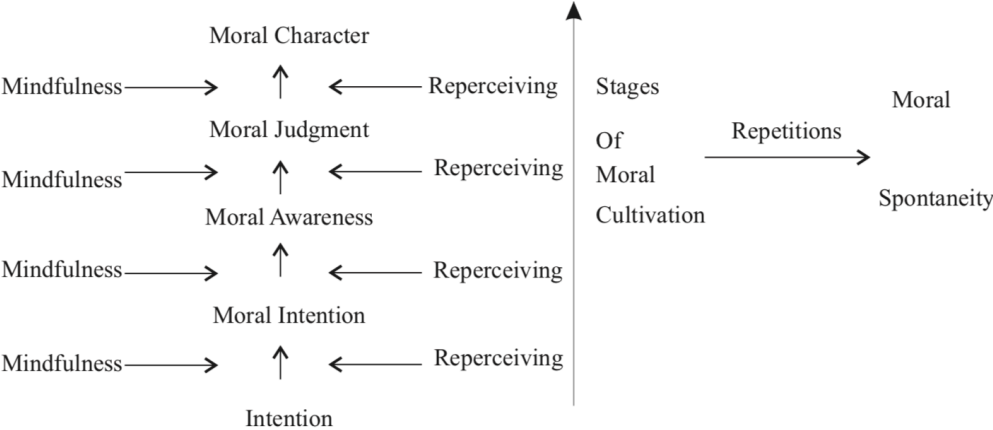


Figure 1.1: Five Components model of ethical decision-making

Overall, Figure 1.1: Five Components model of ethical decision-making (Kamble & Kumar, 2017) is a diagrammatic representation consisting of four linear stages of moral cultivation fused with mindfulness and re-perceiving at every level resulting in constant repetition results in moral spontaneity. “Moral spontaneity can be defined as a state of mind, wherein moral decisions are taken voluntarily and spontaneously, purely for the sake of fairness of the act” where moral spontaneity implies a short span of time (Kamble & Kumar, 2017, p. 652). With moral cultivation, mindfulness ethical training develops the moral spontaneity necessary to make decisions in a short span of time while recognizing a variety of possible alternatives. Overall, the development of moral spontaneity can be associated or understood as moral perfection as a mastery of ethical decision making. Understanding these five components provides admissions professionals with the ability and capacity to make a decision through a systematic and ethical process of development.

In conclusion, as admissions professionals step into the story of a high school students’ college decision-making process, their commitment to the NACAC core values frame moral judgment that informs the admissions profession while moral cultivation empowers ethical decision making. Where the role of an admissions professional is critical to both students and institutions, NACAC provides the critical space for them to “band together, learn from one another, and promote the vital role of the admissions profession” (Norris, 2005, p. 12). Through that comradery, servant leadership is given the authority to see transactional interactions transform into relational partnerships. History is being made as moral cultivation promotes ethical decision making in college admissions.

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