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A Hearty Handshake: Improving Collaboration between Admissions Officers and Registrars

BY ROBERT BOGGS, LINDA DAMMER, EDWARD TROMBLEY, AND MELANIE WINTER

It is revolutionary for many admissions directors and registrars to consider that they might work together as allies. At the risk of oversimplifying, admissions department staff often are considered the “quantity” people, trying to seat as many applicants as possible and so putting the need for student numbers over the need to find the best applicants whose education-related goals “fit” the particular institution. By contrast, registrar’s office staff often are cast as the “quality” people—those who spend their days combing through arcane university policy manuals seeking reasons to disqualify the applicants admissions staff have advanced.

Representatives of three different institutions—a small, residential, traditional liberal arts university; a large, for-profit postsecondary career education company; and a large private aeronautical university with more than 150 locations worldwide—came together at AACRAO’s 98th annual meeting to discuss how improved collaboration between admissions officers and registrars has worked for them.

Shenandoah University is a small, private liberal arts institution in Winchester, Virginia. The University comprises six schools and offers more than 90 undergraduate and graduate programs. The school’s highest enrollments are in the Conservatory and health professions programs. Undergraduate programs are offered at the Shenandoah Valley campus, though the University offers online courses

in some programs of study. Corinthian Colleges, Inc. (CCi) is one of the largest postsecondary career education companies in North America. CCi offers accredited short-term diploma programs and associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. Its main program areas include health care, criminal justice, business, information technology, transportation technology and maintenance, and construction trades. In addition, CCi offers online degree programs in business, accounting, criminal justice, paralegal, and information technology. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, the world’s largest fully accredited university specializing in aviation and aerospace, is a nonprofit, independent institution offering more than 40 baccalaureate, master’s, and Ph.D. programs through its four colleges: Arts and Sciences, Aviation, Business, and Engineering. Embry-Riddle educates students at residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Florida; Prescott, Arizona; and through the Worldwide Campus, with more than 150 locations in the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The University is a major research center, seeking solutions to real-world problems in partnership with the aerospace industry, other universities, and government agencies.

Although the mission, goals, and structure of these three institutions differ, each institution has a traditional admissions and registrar’s office. The two offices and their

teams may seem at odds, but they share many of the same goals. For example, every member of the admissions team has the overarching goal of finding qualified applicants to admit to the institution and helping guide said applicants into the student phase in the hope that they eventually will graduate. The registrar's team assesses incoming credit for transfer, protects student information, and provides complete, accurate, and truthful information concerning students as well as institutional policies. These unlikely allies can find ways to work together to achieve their shared goals—*i.e.*, enrolling qualified applicants and seeing those students graduate. However, both offices must honor their commitment and sustain their efforts.

Four key principles are at the heart of the matter:

- organizational structure;
- communication channels;
- shared goals; and
- collaboration.

Organizational structure is an issue when admissions and registrar's offices report to different vice presidents. The collective experience of the panel was that in such cases, individual vice presidents had their own priorities or agendas, and they were not always aligned with the other vice president's priorities or agenda. Presenters from Embry-Riddle, where the admissions and registrar's offices report jointly to a single associate vice president, believe the shared reporting structure allows them to better align their departments as they share common university-level goals. This was not the experience at the other presenting institutions.

At institutions without a shared reporting structure, relationship building fell to the director of admissions and the registrar, who would have to develop an open style of communication and, ultimately, foster collaboration. Once a trusting relationship between the managers was established, one helpful activity was interdepartmental meetings at which matters both large and small that affected the departments were shared. Presenters suggested starting small, perhaps with the director or associate director of admissions attending a registrar's office meeting (or vice versa). Thus, each team could begin to work alongside and trust the other; when larger interdepartmental meetings or projects are scheduled, they will be more productive because the groundwork of collaboration already will

have been established. Proximity also helps: While it may not always be possible for the two offices to be located in the same space, in the same building, or even on the same side of campus, efforts by the director of admissions or the registrar to set up a meeting or to share a lunch will go a long way toward fostering a relationship that ultimately will help each department accomplish its work and achieve shared institutional goals.

In its simplest form, communication is a transaction between two parties to influence an outcome. The importance of directors of admissions and registrars communicating cannot be overstated; managing communications is as important as developing relationships. As managers, we spend the majority of our days communicating with administration, faculty, and staff, so we have to be sure that our communication channels are open, free, and clear of distractions. Research shows that having a clear communication channel within an organization streamlines the functions of the institution and helps achieve shared goals. Raina (2010) postulates that internal communication activities are a key determinant of how effectively organizations meet their shared goals. Although there is some divergence of goals in that admission's officers want to enroll students while registrars want to ensure that institutional policies are upheld, the shared goal is for accepted students ultimately to graduate.

Collaboration is the culmination of understanding organizational structure, developing open communication channels between the admission's office and the registrar's office, and living shared goals. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide staff suggest that if admissions adjusts its targets and goals to focus on enrolling better-screened and better-qualified candidates—even if the result is fewer new enrollments—then it is worth the effort. Retaining qualified students is easier and a better use of resources and completion rates increase when candidate pools are narrowed to the most qualified. To accomplish this, Embry-Riddle's admissions office is responsible for collecting applicants' academic documents (only official copies are accepted), and candidates do not advance in the admission process until their complete files have been compiled.

Embry-Riddle Worldwide's director of admissions and registrar attribute their close working relationship to many factors:

- Both report to the associate vice president of marketing and enrollment management, which facilitates collaboration and shared goals.
- They actively seek opportunities to bring their departments into contact with each other through guest presentations at each other's team meetings and shared enrollment management functions.
- Both managers inherited their teams when they assumed their current roles. While they appreciate the institutional knowledge the teams possess, the team members may resist change and feel invested in the status quo.
- They take advantage of as many opportunities for cooperation as possible in order to forge and maintain a close working relationship. They discuss unusual student cases as well as policies and procedures, and they pursue joint committee work—particularly the Academic Standards Committee, which reviews petitions to enter or re-enter the University when a student fails to meet admissions standards or has been dismissed.
- Collaboration during the recent transition to a new student information system also proved beneficial as it promoted understanding of how processes flowed from admissions to the registrar's office and of the impacts of system decisions on both working environments.

Understanding the institution's organizational structure and managing its various communication channels helps the admissions and registrar's offices identify shared goals and promotes collaboration. Ultimately, this benefits students as much as the University.

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About the Authors

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MELANIE WINTER served as Registrar and Director of Institutional Research at Shenandoah University until her recent retirement. With more than 35 years of experience in higher education, she has served as Registrar at Walden University as well as the American Public University System and has held positions at Illinois Institute of Technology and the University of Minnesota. She holds a master of arts degree from St. Mary's University of Minnesota.