

Finding Your Next Superstar

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

Although your admissions staff is likely complete at this point of the cycle, it's never too early to start the search for new talent. How to spot the next superstar to bring in well-qualified students who will be retained and won't require heavy discounting to enroll? One who will stay more than a year or two, won't experience premature burnout and has the potential to be promoted?

While your own student ambassadors and tour guides are an obvious starting point, beware of filling your permanent openings exclusively from their ranks. As a young alumnus, your current student guides will likely have only one institutional perspective, and that, from a student point of view. Can they adjust that focus to include the viewpoints of families and referral sources, as well?

One obvious danger of going directly from the classroom to an entry-level admissions office at the same college or university is that your new staffer will not know his or her "subject" well. As a student, his or her "subject" was English, or education, or business. Now, as an alumnus and novice admissions counselor, the subject to master is "your institution." Can your new staffer transcend his or her personal student experiences to take a broader, objective view?

Finally, your new hire must be as proficient in knowing your competition as he or she is in your institution. They must not only be able to present a compelling "30-second elevator message" about your own campus, but also need to know equally well the competitive advantages of competing colleges and universities. That's why it is often advantageous to hire a graduate of an aspirational school.

So, a word to the wise is, look beyond your own campus for new hires. The ideal candidate is someone who has mastered the "s-w-o-t" formula (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) of both your campus and that of at least one competing institution.

This person might be an alumnus of your school who has gone on to graduate at a peer intuition, or vice-versa. A third choice might be someone who, as consultant or vendor, has worked with a number of similar colleges and universities, including your own.

When looking for your next "superstar," beware of candidates who say they want to enter the admissions profession because they "love people." Obviously, you would not hire a candidate lacking in interpersonal skills. The challenge is that while a viable, long-term member of your team must enjoy working with a wide range of people, he or she must also possess many other equally important attributes, among them high energy, ability to manage details, a thick skin, perseverance in the face of frequent rejection and a strong work ethic. If your new hire offers the potential for promotion within your office, this individual will need to become conversant with market research, demographics and yes, with student financial aid formulas.

That leads us to another peril of hiring young graduates who think of endless admissions travel as "fun" and "exciting." As the novelty of the road inevitably begins to wear off, it's vital to make sure that the candidate's expectations about the job are a good fit with the reality of the counselor's position. The former cheerleader and fraternity president may be great with people, but what about the myriad details that go with the position, the arranging of appointments, the prospect research, the follow-up, the transcript review? Look for experience with task-oriented projects as well as those involving primarily social interaction.

Because turnover is costly and detrimental to team building in your shop, how can you identify those who will stay beyond a year or two? The reality is that the bright, promising young hires you seek are the same talented young graduates who will have many other options. But you can minimize turnover by giving them a reality

check about the job, being honest and thorough in your job description and interview process.

While there's no magical formula, check the candidate's resume for continuity and commitment to one or more organizations during their college years. If the candidate played soccer and acted in the drama club all four years, that's a better recommendation than one who lists a dozen short-term activities. Ask direct questions of references: Is this candidate likely to stay more than a year or two? Is he or she qualified for promotion? How does he/she handle setbacks and details?

The admissions world is replete with successful directors, deans and vice presidents for enrollment who started as entry-level counselors. Likewise, it is full of former admissions staffers who, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, could not sustain any demonstrable success. By incorporating these suggestions into your hiring plan, you can maximize your chances of finding the former and minimize the odds of recruiting the latter.

Scott D. Miller recently began his 11th year as president of Wesley College in Dover, DE, which has tripled its traditional enrollment during his tenure. He recently began his 17th year as a college president.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell is a former president of Carlow University, Pittsburgh, PA. She is a partner in the executive search firm of Gallagher-Fennell Higher Education Services.

Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.

Source: Enrollment Manager, Volume 3, Issue 4. The Dysart Group, Inc. October 1, 2007.