



The Career College Information Source

# Admissions 2020 and Beyond

*Modernizing processes and approaches for today's student-consumer*

*By Dr. Jean Norris, Managing Partner/CEO, Norton Norris, Inc.*

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A new decade is a perfect time to examine where we've been and where we're headed. The higher education sector has additional motivation to stay relevant in the face of changing consumer behavior, increased competition, government scrutiny and the necessity to improve the bottom line.

This article examines the preferences of consumers and how other industries have adapted to

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realize greater success and client satisfaction. Reducing "friction" in the recruitment process and changing the value proposition in admissions are two areas that are explored in-depth.

## Why change?

One of the biggest reasons to change is to first ask, "Why not?" The train has already left the station! According to a recent Harvard Business Review article (Halligan,

2018), the sales funnel must be retired and replaced. It simply no longer works. Marketers outside of higher education embraced this trend years ago and not only adapted, but they are on the second iteration. The higher education sector continues to try and make sense of why things aren't working while they hold on to outdated enrollment models (Bonchek & France, 2014). The result is frustration, unpredictable outcomes and declining results.

We see evidence of the enrollment funnel crumbling as our student-consumer (from Gen X, millennials and Gen Z) makes their search and selection preferences clear:

- They don't want to be sold
- They expect customization
- They don't want to talk on the phone
- They want 24/7, instant response service
- They prefer to use technology/mobile devices
- They don't want to come in for an appointment
- They'll do extensive online research in advance of purchase
- They are skeptical of marketing tactics and want authenticity
- They may do the paperwork, but

it's not always a commitment

The newest entry into the higher ed marketplace are the *Gen Z's*. This group may be even more addicted to their digital devices than other

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generations. *Gen Z's* "are defined as 24 and younger, will make up 1/3 of the population by 2020 and are "on track to become the most well-educated generation yet" (Paterson, 2019).

The good news is this generation is much more open to alternative forms of higher education and training. The idea of practical degrees that result in good paying careers is appealing. A recent study by The College Savings Foundation (CSF) showed that this group is a much better educated consumer and will carefully weigh the cost of college with outcomes and future employment and earnings (Paterson, 2019). In other words, they will be seeking to understand the

value your school or college will deliver.

Given the Gen Z's have grown up with Google, they tend to be more individualistic and more resistant to marketing and sales tactics. They prefer to do their own behind the scenes research and investigating, too. This is primarily out of habit and because their mobile technology allows them to do this quickly, efficiently and whenever they desire. Keep in mind that *Gen Z'ers* are 25% more likely than *millennials* to say they are addicted to their digital devices and "a full 40% are self-identified digital device addicts" (Paterson, 2019).

Those working in the traditional admissions counseling profession have also called into question what their role for the future really should be. Jim Jump, past president for the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) recently stated, "If a college counselor's job is helping students navigate a process that's complex and confusing, then coaching is part of that job. Hopefully, it's not all we do.



**DR. JEAN NORRIS** is an award-winning author, speaker and advocate for ethical sales processes. As a 31-year veteran of the higher ed sector, her experience as an admissions director, dean of admissions, vice-president of marketing/enrollment management and academic dean has

prepared her to serve hundreds of institutions and thousands of professionals.

Jean is the developer of the **award-winning** and legally endorsed *EnrollMatch® Admissions Training Program* (featuring the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>**). Her work to continuously advance tools to support admissions and serve students led to the creation of the **MyGuidance Coach®** (MGC) software (also featuring the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>**).

Dr. Norris actually began her own educational career in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program and went on to earn a BA in Management, an MA in Communication

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Norris serves as managing partner/CEO at **Norton Norris, Inc.** a full service agency specializing in marketing, mystery shopping, faculty and staff training and enrollment solutions. Jean also serves as the Allied Chair for *Career Education Colleges and Universities (CECU)*, Chairman of the Board for the *Association for the Advancement of the College Admissions Profession (AACAP)* and a Board Member for the *Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF)*.

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Might college coaching be the next iteration in the evolution of how our profession sees itself” (Jump, 2019)?

### Where to start?

Although throwing away the broken enrollment funnel and the outdated admissions interview may seem like heart-wrenching activities, these are the two places with the most potential for immediate impact. It is only when we let go of the past that we can create the new future needed to survive, and thrive, with these new realities.

Think of it this way. When you are researching and shopping for something, what experience are you looking for? Many are seeking accurate and trusted information that is available when they want it at the touch of a button. Now think about your enrollment process. What can you do to replicate your favorite search and buying experiences for your prospective students?

One key is to reduce any “friction” you may have in the process. Friction can come in the form of slow loading information, websites that aren’t mobile friendly, too many steps, lack of flexibility in communication modes, complicated instructions, etc. Another form of friction is forcing human interactions, especially early in the process.

A few years back, I was working with a large state university that had 28,000 students and 30,000 staff and faculty and they had a customer service problem. Enrollments were tanking and retention was at an all time low. How can that be with nearly a 1:1 ratio of student to employee? When we mapped out the freshmen experience from initial inquiry to sitting in a classroom, we discovered there were over 122 steps the student had to go through. Every person in the room was wide-eyed with their mouths agape. Talk about making

things complicated for the consumer!

In the world of career college enrollment, the initial steps of requiring people to speak on the phone, schedule an appointment and meet with an admissions representative are all forced human interactions. One only has to look at the student-consumer response to realize these are friction points. The

large percentage of

prospective students who don’t respond to phone calls is one piece of evidence.

Another data point

is the tremendous fall off of those who schedule appointments and then never show up on campus. Although these activities were preferred to a higher degree in the past, technology has made these required activities burdensome for a majority of prospects.

Community colleges have an advantage here due to their openness in sharing a plethora of information, including assessments, for prospective students to better understand their choices. One would think this is ideal except it can cause friction for two major reasons. First, all that information and page after page of detail can be overwhelming unless the website is designed exclusively with the prospective student in mind. Secondly, having information doesn’t necessarily mean that students fully understand their situation and options. Given this, the abundance of information without coaching or an option to meet with someone can create friction in the enrollment process.

Halligan (2019) recommends a movement from the sales or enrollment funnel to the flywheel. Given the buying patterns of consumers, he supports creating more self-service interactions versus

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forced human interactions. He goes on to say, “In today’s market, 80% of your customer touches need to be self-service, and only 20% full service with humans.”

Another opportunity to reduce friction is to minimize handoffs. Admissions will have a better chance of positively impacting the recruitment process if they up-skill their admissions team to pick up where technology leaves off. Allow technology to do some of the mundane, repetitive (but required) tasks and allow admission professionals to form the relationship and handle more complex student interactions.

Once friction is removed from the recruitment process, the focus can move to the next step; creating a meaningful, value-filled proposition instead of the outdated admissions interview.

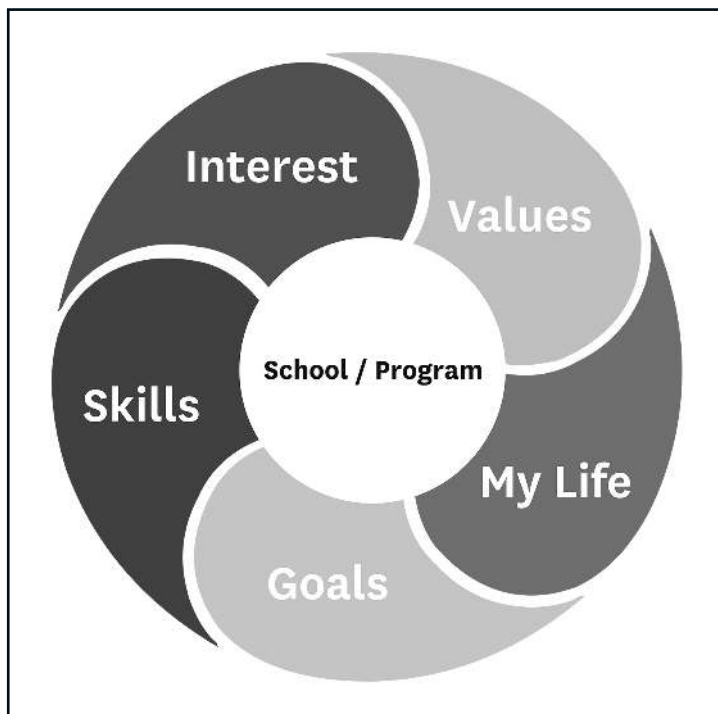
#### **A better way**

As some of you clutch your scripts or training manuals, have no fear. Not everything has to be thrown away. But we now realize that not as many prospective students care for the admissions interview process (sometimes thinly veiled as a career planning session) as we may have thought. In fact, the traditional career college interview still has merit, but it is incomplete.

Today, there is an unprecedented opportunity to improve the value to the marketplace by transforming this dusty, old interview or advising session. By adding the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** (Image 1) to the process, leaders

have the opportunity to take admissions from simply recruiting starts to enrolling successful alumni – and more of them.

**Image 1: 5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>**



When we think about our younger students, we need to keep in mind the world they know. Generally, the younger generations were raised to believe they were the center of the universe and couldn’t do anything wrong. Things were taken care of for them; they were praised every step of the way and sadly, were never allowed to fail. As a result, they may be fearful of taking on anything that has the potential for failure.

In contrast, our adult students may have experienced failure and developed some level of mental toughness as a result, or they too can be fearful of another failure. They may not be aware of how their life experiences are valued or where their talents lie.

With either audience, we want to inspire a growth mindset. Those who

practice a growth mindset don't focus on failure; they allow themselves to go into a situation with the idea they can learn and grow as a result of the experience. This promotes creativity and helps the brain "get smarter" and grow new connections by stretching the mind and pushing toward the possible (Dweck, C., Walton, G. & Cohen, G., 2014).

This is in sharp contrast to the fixed mindset that works towards an outcome and seldom reaches out of one's comfort zone. The focus here is on avoiding failure, proving their way is correct, and coming up with an excuse (or placing blame elsewhere) when it doesn't work.

That is why some of the critical shifts in this updated admissions approach are focused on helping prospective students become more self-aware; to become self-motivated; and to create tenacity and "grit" in order to handle what life will throw their way. This can be difficult for admission professionals who have historically taken center stage in the role of parent, friend, or "fixer." Many admission representatives truly believe they can motivate the student with their positive attitude, a checklist of questions, and "Plan B" back up plans.

Although previous approaches were well intentioned, the elements included in the updated **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** are derived from research on student persistence to produce the highest likelihood of not just college enrollment but also completion (Tinto, 2016). This approach shifts the ownership back to the student to develop self-efficacy or their belief in their ability to succeed at a task or in a specific situation. Obviously, strong self-efficacy promotes goal attainment.

The **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** is a coaching model performed by a well-trained admissions professional using strategic questioning, high level

listening, and optional assessments to guide students in fully understanding each element. This intake is then compared to the college and program/major to determine alignment or "fit."

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It's important to note that there are many assessments available however not all are created with the statistical rigor and purpose of accurate self-discovery. All assessments used in this approach meet the following criteria:

- No cost
- Mobile-friendly
- Fast and easy to use
- Ability to save/print up results
- Proven, statistically reliable and valid
- Meaningful results with additional links for more info
- Widely used by coaching and counseling professionals
- Government sites and/or approved through the Department of Education

Each of the five areas that are explored with the prospective student plays an important role in self-discovery and advising. Specific areas that are essential in this approach are broken down below:

### **Goals**

The creation of meaningful, long-term goals has been tied to student engagement (Dweck, C. et. al, 2014) and even persistence when difficulties arise (Bandura, 1977, 1994). A well-formed goal can provide direction and purpose that are essential to motivation and self-efficacy. The formation of a concrete goal is a major pillar in the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** since it launches the process from a positive mindset versus a focus on what is wrong or missing in a



student's life.

The concept of motivational scaffolding refers to supporting students with tools to meet challenges. Goal setting and self-management strategies are two of the

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tools used in this area. First, goal setting must be meaningful and go beyond asking someone where s/he sees themselves in a few years, too.

The initial response must be deeply explored if it is going to be powerful and attainable. Prospective students are guided to articulate their goals using S.M.A.R.T. criteria. Secondly, a plan must be developed and managed by the student (Bilanich, 2009). We recommend including key milestones and steps to increase ownership and achievement.

A study conducted by Dominique Morisano and her colleagues showed that a goal-setting regimen helped college students earn better grades and stay in school. They encouraged students to write down concrete goals in planning books. "This practice resonates with classic self-efficacy research showing that the simple act of breaking long-term lofty goals into concrete and short-term steps promotes student learning and motivation." (Dweck, C., et. al, 2014).

### ***Interests***

Interests are developed as a result of one's environment. This includes such things as family background, values, experiences, social class, culture, and environment (Career Research, n.d.). The importance of helping students fully explore this area cannot be underestimated since "Interests have been one of the most useful and most enduring constructs in career development" (Career Research, n.d.).

One may assume that people know what they are interested in learning more about; but this isn't true of everyone. In fact, we have seen a disconnect between how one's interests can translate into the type of school and major/career selected. In other cases, it may be difficult for prospective students to fully comprehend that the same motivation that inspires them to pursue interests can become a meaningful career.

A recent study of 1,000 U.S. students enrolled in 2-4 year public and private colleges, showed that a majority of students feel overwhelmed and stressed by selecting a major. Further, a 1/3 of these students weren't sure which major was the best fit for their chosen career path (Ellucian, 2019). When you consider the financial ramifications of this costly mistake, it seems obvious more attention should be spent assisting prospective students in this area.

John L. Holland, one of the most well-known and respected career theorists developed the theory of vocational choice. This theory predicts that a higher degree of connection between personality and environment correlates with more positive career related outcomes, satisfaction and persistence (Reardon, R. & Bullock, Ed., 2004). The theory envelops other research from personality and social psychology, vocational behavior, and individual perception.

### ***Skills***

Skills can be defined as things you do well or naturally. They are the things your friends and family ask for help with because you are simply good at it. What requires further exploration in this step is how these talents can be further developed and leveraged into a career.

We've all experienced those students who have self-doubt though.

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They may not possess the knowledge and skills to perform the tasks necessary for a career field so assume they can't pursue a certain major or career. This is one of the reasons s/he is pursuing higher education or training in the first place. At the end of the day, academic success requires more than natural ability but the openness to learn through hard work (Dweck, C., et. al, 2014).

Working with prospective students in this area ultimately helps them sort through a complicated construct of natural skill alignment and what still needs to be developed. Keep in mind, some students may opt out since they're not willing to do the work required to learn or further develop a new skill. Some students are better served to align a program/career with their natural abilities.

### **Life**

A student's belief in their ability to be successful in school can be fragile so it is imperative that non-cognitive factors are explored to measure their self-efficacy and resilience when inevitable challenges come their way (Tinto, 2016). The "*Life*" factor is explored after goal setting and major/program/career selection. It is imperative that a baseline of where the student wants to end up has been firmly established first. Why? Because *Life* is messy and *Life* will get in the way unless it is thoroughly vetted and considered in the final decision.

Those working in career college admissions have two advantages over other sectors of higher education when it comes to this factor. First, most career colleges have dedicated resources to work with prospective students. This is in sharp contrast to the community college model where much of the process is self-serve. Secondly, career education admission representatives have been using a traditional admissions interview to

examine a student's life for decades. This framework doesn't have to be completely abandoned; however, it does need to be performed at a much more strategic level.

The focus involves exploring non-cognitive factors including the student's belief in themselves, their goals, their mindsets and their feelings of social belonging (Dweck, C., et. al, 2014; Tinto, 2015). "Students

who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote

persistence. In contrast, a student's sense of not belonging, of being out of place, leads to a withdrawal from contact with others that further undermine motivation to persist" (Tinto, 2016).

To effectively facilitate full discovery in this area, the types of questions and the depth of questioning are different. And make no mistake; the degree of listening comprehension must be heightened.

### **Values**

This is an area that we considered leaving out of the model however its importance is undeniable. Values are what you believe in; they represent what is most important in your life; and they are worth fighting for. Given this, values alignment is essential in finding the right fit in terms of the school, the program, the social setting, the career field – everything!

Helping prospective students prioritize their values to define the "deal breaker values" and the ones

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that are not important at all are key. Once defined, these values are weighed against specific career fields to determine alignment. As another piece of the puzzle, understanding what is personally important to an individual and how those same values are supported (or not) can be a critical factor in selecting a good fit career field.

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**Understanding one's values also plays a role in finding the right school or college.**

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Understanding one's values also plays a role in finding the right school or college. If aligned, students tend to be able to "rise above the concerns and obstacles of the moment" and remain motivated. "From a social belonging angle, some students, especially those who may face negative stereotypes, may not feel that the attributes they value most in themselves – their sense of humor, their relationship with their family – make them valuable in the school setting. By thinking about and elaborating upon these qualities, students can bring these values into the school setting and thereby enhance their sense of belonging" (Dweck, C., et. al, 2014).

**Now what?**

The end result of this discovery process is a "Fit Score." This isn't something assigned arbitrarily, it is a cumulative score based on self-ranking by the prospective student of each of the factors. The results could show a clear fit between the prospective student's goals, skills, interests, life and values to the institution and major/program – but they may not. This is where the work of the trained admissions professional really begins.

What factors didn't align? And what specifically was it that caused a low ranking? Is this an area that needs further investigation in order to make

sure the decision is well informed? Is there another major/program that is a better fit?

For those prospective students that are clearly not a good fit to the institution, the beauty is they are in a better state to make a fully informed decision as they move forward than before they met with you. This is truly a service you are providing and an important point of difference in the marketplace. In many cases, this goodwill also leads to increased referrals of others who may be a good fit.

You may be wondering if this level of discovery changes the job of the admissions professional? The answer is "Yes" and it's about time! In "Holland's Theory and Implications for Academic Advising and Career Counseling (2004)," the researchers proved the value of "a process of individual or small group interventions to help persons use information to make educational and occupational decisions that are consistent with personal goals, values, interests, and skills" (Reardon, R. & Bullock, E., 2004).

Your next question may be related to finding the time to do all of this. The important thing is to consider the time spent now on your entire process from securing a qualified inquiry/lead to enrollment. Next, consider how much of that time is productive and actually spent working with a prospective student versus trying to chase them down and convince them to come in for an old-fashioned interview. The decline in contact and show rates have proven today's student consumer doesn't see the value.

This updated approach has been proven to increase conversion rates and enrollments given it is a unique service and one of value to prospective students (Ganster, L. & Norris, J., 2015/2016). In other words,

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admission professionals can spend their time doing meaningful work that makes a difference for the institution as well as the prospective student.

Also, consider that elements of this process can be performed at various stages throughout the recruitment/enrollment cycle. This process can easily be done in a single sitting however it can also be split up. In fact, we have seen success when offering prospective students questions to consider and/or assessments even prior to setting up a meeting. This approach has a significant impact on prospective students actually showing up for their meetings, too.

### Another opportunity

Even if you can master a smoother admissions process as discussed earlier and provide a meaningful service to prospective students, there still remains an even bigger opportunity. How about offering all of this to your prospective students via their mobile device for 24/7 access with options to connect to a qualified admissions professional when they are ready?

Automating processes is a typical strategy employed by many progressive organizations to reduce redundancies, save money and maximize resources. Couple this with the idea of reducing friction in the enrollment process and it isn't hard to imagine software doing some of the work we just outlined (Gormley, S., 2017).

**“MyGuidance Coach® (MGC)** is one technology that is helping to revolutionize automated admissions (Gormley, S., 2017). MGC automates the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** so it can be used either in pre-enrollment or post-enrollment advising. Based on the student responses, MGC pushes customized information about your institution to the prospective student to assist them in making an informed

decision. The process culminates in the development of a Career Action Plan (CAP), which identifies specific milestones and steps to assist prospective students in achieving their goal. This plan stays with the student throughout his or her journey at your institution and gets passed along to other critical team members (financial aid, faculty, career services, etc.) who will help them to work toward their goal (Gormley, S. 2017).

In the past three years, data collected from **MGC** users proves mobile device usage as the number one method students are accessing the software.

Additionally, up to 75% of users are doing so after typical business hours again showing that student-consumers want to “shop” on their own time. We've also been able to show that those using MGC actually start class at rates up to 500% higher than any other inquiry/lead source.

But **MGC** isn't a lead generation tool nor is it preferred for every student. **MGC** is designed to be an extension of your enrollment efforts by reducing friction and offering a meaningful service 24/7.

### Conclusion

Reducing friction in the enrollment process coupled with offering a more meaningful coaching/counseling approach are the first steps toward enrolling more students and empowering them to persist to graduation.

Today's student-consumer has changed the rules of engagement. Their digital addiction and access to information at the touch of a button has changed how they research and make decisions. When making the search and selection process too

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complicated and forcing human interactions, we are introducing friction in the enrollment process. As Halligan (2018) reminds us, “If you want to build a great company, your customer experience has to be 10 times lighter than the competition. It used to be what you sell that really matters, now it’s how you sell that really matters.”

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**Secondly, there is the opportunity to offer a more meaningful service to help prospective students make a well-informed decision.**

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Secondly, there is the opportunity to offer a more meaningful service to help prospective students make a well-informed decision. Upskilling your admissions team to provide the **5 Factors of Fit<sup>SM</sup>** is a strategic next step in improving conversion rates and service.

Finally, the most progressive institutions are utilizing technology to connect with more students, leverage human capital and improve results while inspiring their admissions teams to focus on what really matters – spending time with students.

This is truly an evolution and modernization of the admissions profession. Those working in this role must evolve and transform to help students develop the necessary self-efficacy and grit to not only complete the enrollment process, but to play a meaningful role in enrolling successful alumni.

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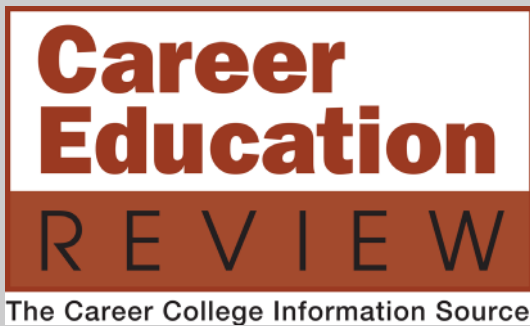
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Charge to: \_\_\_\_\_ Visa \_\_\_\_\_ Mastercard \_\_\_\_\_ American Express

Card Holder Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Card Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Security Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Billing Address (if different than shipping): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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