The Last Admission Decision

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Every business day, hundreds of admission decisions are made on college campuses—some with ease, some with intense debate and some with criticism. After reading The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams by Randy Pausch, I was inspired to reflect on my own life and specifically my profession, college admission. As a director of admission, I am first an educator, who teaches—and learns—along the way.

The “last lecture” is a concept in which college professors consider and deliver a message about what matters most to them. In a sense, a last lecture is a collection of final words of wisdom designed to inspire and leave a legacy. Randy Pausch delivered his last lecture on September 18, 2007 while serving as a professor at Carnegie Mellon University (PA). His lecture became a book and ultimately a New York Times bestseller. As I thought about Pausch’s messages, I began to ponder, “what would I want my last admission decision to be?” Specifically, what matters most to me in making college admission decisions?

The college admission decision significantly impacts individuals’ lives—their experiences, their contributions to society, their earning potential and their future. Over my 15-year career, I have made hundreds of admission decisions—from automatic admits of honors students to those deliberated through a formal admission committee because they are borderline. Some admission decisions are straightforward, while others require significant evaluation and risk-taking.

Assessing a student’s academic achievements and predicting future success in college requires evaluative and analytical skills, professional judgment, discretion and compassion.

College admission staff are often referred to as “gatekeepers” – monitoring who gets through the gate and who does not. I prefer to look at us as “dream-deciders.”

What I Have Learned in College Admission

Along the way, I have learned so much about our profession. First, it is more than a decision, it is about relationships. While I never had a personal connection with a college admission representative when I was searching for a college, I strive to build a relationship with every applicant I encounter. I use the expression, “The people you meet create your future” because it is true. This profession is about counseling students for their future. Second, my job is to guide students through the admission process—it can be overwhelming and intimidating, partially due to the media’s exploitation of selectivity. Unfortunately, the general public still needs to be convinced about the importance of a college education. Finally, the admission profession is hands on. You learn how to make decisions on the job, through experience. You cannot read a book and be instantly and expertly trained on how to make these kind of decisions.

Denials: The Brick Walls

It is not easy denying a student admission to a college or university. We all want to give people chances and opportunities. I still remember the first time I had to deny a student admission. While I was nervous about doing it, it was one of the first times I felt I was doing more than administrative paperwork. It gave me an opportunity to counsel a student about a detour to the same destination. I have seen my fair share of tears when sharing a denial decision, but I see that as a sign of hope among the disappointments. When we deny students admission, we may be closing one door, but we can open another door: referring a student to another school where they may be more successful.

Pausch talks about fulfilling dreams, and one admission decision makes that possible for millions of students every year. But sometimes the best decisions we make for students are the denials. Denial letters provide feedback that can help motivate a student. There are five distinct times when I was denied admission or a job and I am so glad I was—I would not be where I am today if I had not taken those detours.

My “Dutch” Relatives

Pausch talks about his “Dutch uncle,” who gave him honest feedback. In my college admission career, I have formed an entire family of Dutch relatives—all of whom gave me feedback about how to be the best college admission professional I could be. And to this day I still rely on their wisdom to guide the decisions I make.

The beauty of our role in admission is we become a Dutch uncle to our applicants—helping to reinforce the messages of academic achievement and perseverance delivered by the counselors.

Tips

There is always room for improvement in reviewing candidates for admission. Sometimes we need to be reminded of...
some of the admission fundamentals. In processing an application, review once, double check twice. We may see something the second and third time around. Another golden rule is “know your applicant.” Remember that in the simplest application form, there is much information that can be gleaned about a student. And finally, even with the poorest prepared applicant, look for the best in him/her.

**Today’s Admission Decisions**

Today’s admission files are different than when I started in the field in 1994, with challenges never before faced. They involve evaluating criminal conduct history to determine potential risks to the campus. There can be factors of learning disabilities to wrestle over. And the advent of electronic transcripts has sped up decision-making, but has also increased the expectations of students in providing them a timely decision.

Like Pausch, I worked for the Walt Disney Company so I shared his fascination and interest in Disney’s creation of magic. From time to time, I wish upon a star hoping I can be like the Fairy Godmother and use a magic wand to change a high school transcript of C’s and D’s to A’s and B’s. And I’m sure some of my colleagues could hear me “whistling while I work” as I review applications. Sometimes we have to play *The Great Mouse Detective* in which we seek hidden information to understand an applicant. Throughout my review of applications, I have come across the Belles (intellectual bookworms), the Peter Pans (egocentrics) and the Goofys (those who goofed off because of ‘senioritis’). There are days when I wish I had Aladdin’s magic lamp and a genie to make some of the decisions for me. But, alas, my office is not the Magic Kingdom. The Walt Disney Company seeks to create happiness while those of us in admission educate to enroll and enroll to educate. Walt Disney himself was a dream-maker who inspires me daily to add a little pixie dust, a little magic and a little wonder to my work. My training and experiences as a Disney cast member taught me many elements that have helped me in my decision-making moments.

This past February, two graduate student Disney Memorial Pausch Fellowships were established at Carnegie Mellon in Pausch’s honor. In connection to this creation, the Walt Disney Company put a medallion in the Magic Kingdom which reads: “Be good at something; it makes you valuable. Have something to bring to the table, because that will make you more welcome” (Roth, 2009). Similarly, candidates for admission should consider what they “bring to the table”, what they excel at and the value they bring to college. Admission decisions are more valuable when students have made that kind of investment.

**My Last Admission Decision**

While I do not plan to make my last admission decision until 2038 when I retire, my ideal last admission decision would be one that I wrestle over and lose sleep over. I want it to be an applicant worth fighting for—one who deserves a chance. This applicant should view his/her acceptance as a new beginning. This decision should be a holistic one—one that considers more than the typical grade point average, trend of grades and test scores. Ideally, it would include the evaluation of creativity and motivation. I am one of those students who had an overall high school grade point average of 3.8, but my ACT wasn’t comparable at a 22. However, my creativity, initiative and motivation to learn guided me well through my college experience, life and my work in college admission. I also seek any applicant who is honest about his/her academic history and accepts responsibility for past academic choices and decisions. Preferably this decision-making process would include multiple perspectives—from those who know the candidate to my colleagues who are also experienced in this type of evaluation. I would personally interview two to three individuals who knew the candidate and would provide both positive and constructive feedback about the candidate’s background and aspirations. I also expect this applicant to graduate (preferably in four years) and to stay in touch with me during his/her college career and beyond; remember, it is about cultivating a relationship. I cannot tell you right now if I would admit or deny in my final decision, but I would carefully consider all aspects before making a decision.

Even though Pausch’s last lecture came when he was nearing his death, you do not have to be dying to reflect on your role and impact in this world. And remember, an admission decision can start or end a dream. I prefer to be a dream maker.

*Dedicated to Dylan, Logan and Chloe, the children of Randy Pausch, who will one day receive an admission decision.*

**REFERENCES**


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