In my sixteen years in college admissions, I have evolved in my work, role, and mission. I began as an eager recruiter, excited to help high school students get into college; now I am a seasoned director committed to college access. As I reflect on my career, a five-stage progression emerges: learn, execute, lead, contribute, advocate. While not mutually exclusive, these action-oriented stages demonstrate growth, education, and implementation. They also constitute a basic, personal interpretation of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers’s (AACRAO) Professional Practices and Ethical Standards. Whether you feel an affinity for one stage or another, and whether you’re at the beginning, middle, or end of your career, may this perspective provide guidance so that you can be an outstanding professional in college admissions.

**LEARN**

New admissions professionals are anxious to learn—excited to learn more about the schools they represent; enthusiastic to learn how the admissions process works; eager to know how to talk about preparing for college. College admissions representatives join professional associations such as AACRAO as part of the learning process, or they may attend new professionals workshops. Much of the learning about admissions takes place on the job. We become educated about the National Association for College Admission Counseling’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice in order to best serve our students. At this stage, we shadow other professionals in the field to learn different ways to execute our tasks and build relationships. Learning includes reading about relevant topics, subscribing to e-newsletters, and seeking knowledge to advance our understanding of the field of college admissions. Most important, if we are to consider ourselves experts in the field, the learning never stops. Fortunately, an unending stream of published articles and news stories keeps our minds active on the cause. And let us not forget that working in higher education affords us the awesome opportunity to continue our own education. After all, we educate to enroll, and we enroll to educate.

**EXECUTE**

The second stage is the “doing” stage. Here we put into practice all we have learned. Executing means building relationships with prospective students, setting recruitment goals, informing high school and community college counselors, scheduling school visits, attending college fairs, etc. We execute our line of work with strong communication skills, a passion for students, a positive attitude, and professionalism. During this stage, we begin to
develop our own styles of delivery. As we implement, we reflect on the impact of our actions on students. It is at this stage that we begin to see the fruits of our labor: students graduate whom we admitted only two to four years previously. Executing requires stamina, patience, and focus. When we fulfill our job responsibilities, we fulfill the missions of our schools.

**LEAD**

Having been roadrunners for a few years, we typically hunger to do more—more than process admission files; more than give presentations; more than recalculate grade point averages. We begin to show leadership by advancing in our careers to the position of associate director or director of admissions. Leading is where we are able to make a difference. In leadership roles, we have authority and freedom to change the course of the field of college admissions. As leaders, admissions professionals strategize, plan, and guide for the future. Preparing for these roles requires continued education and experience—a combination of the leading and executing stages. Leadership does not have to be concentrated in formal titles and roles. Rather, it is demonstrated by taking the initiative on projects, mentoring tour guides, or even partnering with another office on campus for recruitment purposes.

**CONTRIBUTE**

Leading is not enough. It is at this next stage that we are called to give back to our field. We may contribute by writing an article for publication or by presenting at a state or national conference (either of these in turn might be referenced by future professionals). We are responsible for perpetuating the sharing of knowledge. We are called to serve at the state or national level, either by joining a committee or by holding a position. We can contribute by mentoring other admissions colleagues on our own teams or elsewhere. This stage provides excellent opportunities for professional development.

**ADVOCATE**

The final stage is that we become advocates. Representing our respective institutions is no longer enough. Rather, it is imperative that we become advocates for change—that we challenge public policy, support college access, protect students’ rights, improve education standards, and uphold the integrity of our field. At this stage we must be aware of current issues in higher education that affect admissions and enrollment management. This is part of our social responsibility. As we advance to this final stage, we are expected to be the ultimate student advocates—voices for students who cannot speak on their own behalf and champions of all types of students, regardless of their personal or cultural history or background. Advocacy requires a commitment to diversity, equity, and excellence. We must encourage early college planning and develop new tools for college preparation. At this stage, we may lobby for access funding, financial aid support, or college counseling initiatives. Advocates use data and research to guide their action. Through this stage, we can transform the future of our field.

**CONCLUSION**

As you reflect on your career, determine at what stage you are and then decide what steps you will take to progress to the next level. As you advance in the field, the different roles you play will demand different focuses. Ultimately, we are called as educators to evolve, learn, grow, and develop as we take and give both to our profession and to society. What has your path looked like to date? What will your path look like as you set your face toward the future?

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**About the Author**

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