



ADMISSIONS INSIGHTS WITH ZAK HARRIS

Former Admissions Officer at
Johns Hopkins, Bowdoin, GW,
and Regis College

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Zak Harris worked as the Assistant Director and Multicultural Coordinator at Johns Hopkins University, the Associate Dean of Admissions at Bowdoin College, the Assistant Director and Multicultural Recruiter at George Washington University, and as the Director of Admissions at Regis College. For our FAO interview series, Zak tells us more about how he got into the admissions field, what he enjoys about working with students, gives us a look into the different roles he played while working in admissions, and more.

What inspired you to get into the admissions field? Was it something you've always wanted to do?

The short version is that I got into graduate school at GW and thought at that time that I was going to be a consultant. My program was an organizational leadership program focused on consulting. I thought I would go into Deloitte or something along those lines in DC or LA. I get into this grad program and they were like, "hey this is a head stop because it's a one year accelerated experience, we need you to be working at the same time because a lot of what you're going to be doing is analyzing your job - things that are going well, things that aren't, focus on case study work, on translating that into the job that you currently have." I didn't know that when I applied to that program, but hearing that I was like, "Oh crap, what am I going to do?"

When I was in college, I had some experience interviewing for the admissions office and I liked to

give tours whenever they needed help. So I thought I'll apply to the admissions office, I'll just work there for a year and then go off and be the consultant that I wanted to be. And then I actually really enjoyed what I was doing. I loved talking to students and families and helping them get into GW. The more that I learned about admissions and the experience I could have, I was like, wow - this is something I want to keep doing. I stayed *another* year, and then I stayed another year and then I moved over to working and Hopkins. I said, alright, I guess this is what I'm gonna do.

So, it was an accident - I wasn't inspired initially, but then I eventually became motivated by student work and the joy that I was getting and still get - even today - with students, and walking them through the college process as best as I can.

What have been some similarities between the different admissions offices you've worked at?

In terms of similarities, it's always been about the students for me. Regardless of the four places I've worked, students have always been at the center - of admissions decision, the policies, or anything that impacted the student body. It was always around the student. That was similar across all the places that I worked.

What about major differences?

I've worked at schools with a wide range of selectivity: colleges that took basically nobody, to schools that took 40 percent or even 50 percent of the students. The sizes of the schools were pretty different. The typical kid would also be different, depending on where we were - a kid who grew up in southern Maine applying to Bowdoin would be very different from a kid who grew up near GW.



Could you tell us more about how being the Director of Undergraduate Admissions differs from regular admissions officer or reader roles?

Being the director, I was in charge of the staff and our philosophy, our training, what we were looking for in students, managing and influencing new technology, strategies, making sure that everybody was on the same page. When I had my staff travel across the country, we all knew what we were going to do, what we were going to say, what the mission of the college was. Being an admissions officer or a reader is different - there's

still a lot of responsibility, but you're focusing on reading applications and maybe one to two additional responsibilities. You could be in charge of the tour guides, or campus events, but usually reporting to a more senior member. Both [roles are] fundamentally still about students, but certainly at a little bit of a different level, with different responsibilities, and different pressures as well.

What was your favorite part of working in admissions?

One, I absolutely love to travel. I was able to visit almost all 50 states mostly because I had events or presentations or student work in those areas. For InGenius now, I get to travel to Asia - it's been awesome. Secondly, it's very similar to what inspired me to do the job in the first place which is students. I get very happy, excited, and motivated to help kids and I think that has been the case at every job I've had and college I've worked at.



What is the typical peak college application like from an admissions office perspective?

Super busy! It was crazy, like organized chaos. We were basically spending November through April reading applications, making sure all the materials were in, and then going into committee, making all the decisions, seeing the shape of the class to make sure that all the different components were there.

It was just insane because you're having to meet deadline after deadline, and you have to obviously finish reading every single application that comes into the office for your territory - it was all hands on deck. So, if somebody was having trouble finishing their load, it still needed to get done. So other people had to help. If someone got sick or had to leave the office for whatever reason, it still needed to get done. It always was a true team effort. Even the busiest and craziest times brought offices together. It was truly everyone working together towards the same goal for the entire time frame.



Was there a method to which the admissions offices you worked at looked at the makeup of a class?

Yeah, I think generally speaking, it was kind of the same. Obviously, there are nuances at every place I've worked at. But overall, all the places I've worked at wanted to fill a class that was a good fit for the community, with people whose demeanors and goals all lined up with the institutions. We always made sure that we took kids who were close by. When I was working at GW and Hopkins, I coordinated programs that gave scholarships to local DC kids.

At the same time, we wanted kids from as many states as possible. That was something that was important - making sure we had students from as many countries as possible. I think just wanting to fill a class that was going to fit well together was always really important. I never worked at a place that made decisions haphazardly. It was always about being deliberate, about how this person fit in the larger community.

Do you have any memorable anecdotes which jump out to you from your time working in admissions?

My favorite anecdotes all surround specific people in a larger sense - that I met on the road traveling, and then getting to know them through interviews or emails or staying in communication. Then they applied, they got in, then they chose to come. Seeing those kids actually attended the college or university I was working at, seeing them occasionally getting meals or walking around campus and seeing them actually have success,

that was really valuable and gratifying and satisfying and exciting. I can probably think of like 30 kids that I've thought, that kid deserved to get in, he or she did everything we wanted - they're now lawyers, or in the UN, or in medical school. They're doing all these great things. To think that I had at least a small role in their success is something that is really cool and awesome to be a part of.