Millennials Invading: Building Training for Today’s Admissions Counselors

By Kent Barnds

A few years ago, while talking to my admissions staff at Augustana College, I realized that the antiquated way in which our industry provides training for our staff members no longer serves the needs of our profession. In the wake of staff meeting discussions of duties for the coming weeks, I was startled by the differences in approaches by the generations of employees. For example, if the week’s priorities included personal calls to prospects, the Baby Boomers would leave staff meetings thinking, “I don’t care how late I have to stay. I am personally going to make all of those calls this week.” Gen X admissions counselors seemed to wonder, “When are my student workers going to be in this week so they can make the calls he is requiring?” Millennial counselors seemed to think, “He can’t mean me because he didn’t mention just me. And even if he did — gross! — students don’t want a telephone call!”

As chief admissions officer at two small colleges, I have been responsible, in part, for ensuring that entry-level admissions counselors are trained properly. I have learned through trial and error, and I have adapted my methods to be increasingly sensitive to the learning curve of new employees. My thoughts about training new admissions counselors changed considerably as a new generation — Millennials — entered the workplace.

When I began my career in admissions in the early 1990s, much of the emphasis of training was on “travel tips,” making friends on the road, and learning “to fly a desk.” Too many admissions offices continue to use outdated training methods — methods I experienced when I began my career — rather than providing the personal attention and individualized training Millennials are accustomed to receiving. Counter to this generation’s desires or learning styles, many admissions offices either neglect formal training altogether or assume that a good hire will readily acquire the skills necessary for success.

Because it is common practice to hire admissions counselors with little or no previous experience, training is critically important. The pace of admissions work is fast, and admissions staffs typically are small in numbers; new counselors therefore must be trained immediately to assume significant responsibilities, including relationship building, using technology effectively, interviewing prospective students, conducting information sessions, reviewing applications, and ensuring productive high school visits with guidance counselors and prospective students.

The typical new admissions counselor is an enthusiastic, likable, capable, recent college graduate entering the professional job market for the first time. Although the role of an admissions counselor varies by institution, general responsibilities include visiting high schools; representing the institution at college fairs; conducting information sessions for campus visitors; developing relationships with prospective students, parents, high schools, and college counselors; interviewing prospective students; communicating with families by telephone and e-mail; and providing follow-up information for various audiences. In essence, we expect the counselor to become the college.
This is an enormous responsibility for a newly minted college graduate. Seldom does a new employee possess the traits necessary to “be” the college. Further, it is rare that sufficient thought has gone into the process by which existing staff are to train a new counselor to be successful. Often, admissions leaders rely on old (outdated) methods and/or training. A fresh look at and a new focus on training are necessary.

The Whos and What’s of Training Millennial Admissions Professionals

To develop a training program for new admissions counselors, it is important to answer three questions: Who is being trained? What methods should be used to train new staff? Who will be involved in delivering the training? The answers to these questions influence the development of a training program and suggest a specific approach for new admissions counselors — particularly Millennials.

We should begin by describing the attributes of a generation unlike any other. Millennials are best described as confident, hopeful, goal and achievement oriented, civic-minded, inclusive, and connected (Gimbel 2007). Because they believe in balancing their work and personal lives, and because their true loyalty lies with their personal lives rather than with their jobs, new Millennial employees may fail to see the appeal of traditional admissions activities and late nights. Millennials are the first generation to have been taught experientially and with teamwork as a core component of the learning experience. Technology has been infused throughout their lives, and their learning preferences mirror a “bit and byte” approach: structure and direction are of paramount importance (Raines 2002).

Given these generational differences, a training program must be tailored to match Millennial learning styles and conventions. It is unrealistic to expect Millennials to respond to the type of training provided two, five, or ten years ago. Verret (2000) suggests that success in training and developing Millennials should include letting them know that what they do matters; telling the truth; explaining why you are asking them to do something; learning their language; being on the lookout for opportunities to reward them; praising them in public; making the workplace fun; modeling behavior; and giving them the tools to do the job. In today’s admissions offices, most (if not all) of these suggestions are foreign; but if today’s new admissions professionals are to be well trained — and retained — then they must be adopted as standard practice.

Identifying the correct trainer is critical to developing a re-focused training program. Those individuals having the most direct knowledge of specific content areas should be responsible for training new admissions professionals. For example, those responsible for data management should train a new employee on that subject while those who cast vision and chart direction should provide training on those subjects. It is also a good idea to enroll new staff members in national programs specifically designed to orient entry-level admissions counselors to the admissions profession; such programs provide valuable external perspective on roles and responsibilities. All of these approaches align with the learning preferences of Millennials, who want to be valued and informed.
Like many professions, admissions is guided by industry principles. Discussion of profession-specific ethics is an important part of training. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) “Statement of Principles and Good Practices (SPGP)” should be given to counselors prior to their first day of work. The statement details the professional expectations of admissions counselors. For Millennials, emphasizing professional ethics confirms the value of their job: What they do matters.

On the new employee’s first day of work, the director of admissions should discuss key elements of the document and probe for understanding of its principles. Because review of a policy statement may incite both impatience and distaste in the Millennial (Raines 2002), the discussion should follow a format that appeals to the trainees rather than the trainer. To further complement their learning preferences, Millennials should be presented with opportunities to practice related interactions.

In addition to reviewing standard college policies — i.e., those relating to vacation, sick time, paid holidays, etc. — human resource professionals should discuss policies related to privacy and personal use of computers, as well as federally mandated policies like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Every new employee should participate in a FERPA training session and sign a document stating that he or she understands FERPA; the institution must keep this statement on file. Because Millennials tend to be less comfortable than previous generations with concepts such as accountability and personal responsibility, human resources professionals must work harder to ensure that new employees understand the implications of noncompliance with institutional policies.

**Training and Development**

Entry-level counselors must begin contributing as quickly as possible. Thus, training and development goals must be attained along a short timeline. However, because of the important responsibilities given to entry-level counselors, a successful training program also must build knowledge that counselors may not need to use for some time.

Any training program for admissions counselors must emphasize information and skills the counselor will use immediately, e.g., how to interview; how to conduct information sessions; how to use technology to communicate, etc.; it also must provide more comprehensive and developmental information, e.g., about the college’s departments and strategic plan, faculty and staff meetings, and the student selection process.

In addition, training programs must emphasize relationship development, proactive prospect management, proper use of technology, and professionalism. These are the emerging competencies of a successful admissions officer, and too often, they are left to chance rather than being developed through intentional training. In the case of Millennials, all are topics that need to be emphasized during training.
Another element of effective training is thorough discussion of the essential responsibilities of the position. Although it is common practice to discuss such responsibilities during the interview and when offering a candidate a position, it is imperative to clearly state expectations for performance and to reiterate these points during training. Discussion and review of the job description should facilitate this outcome, especially as Millennials often are overconfident (despite their lack of experience) and unlikely to ask questions.

Any newly hired counselor should be required to meet individually with each staff member to learn his or her specific responsibilities. Ideally, these meetings would be guided by a previously developed list of questions rather than undirected conversation. It is critical that performance appraisals, expectations for success, and traditional advancement pathways be discussed. Although this aspect of training seems basic, it is important to ensure that a counselor understands her responsibilities, how performance will be assessed, and timelines for promotions. This part of training is more important than ever as it will help Millennials address any of their own unrealistic expectations and desires for immediate advancement.

Finally, an experiential element should be included in training developed for Millennial admissions counselors. Verret (2000) states that it is essential to model behavior for Millennials; further, Millennials should be provided a substantial amount of “actual experience.” For example, a new counselor should be required to observe as an experienced staff member conducts interviews and information sessions, makes recruitment calls, and audits e-communication used to develop and strengthen relationships. Subsequent to such observation, the new counselor should perform similar tasks as an experienced staff member observes. Afterwards, because Millennials crave feedback, an experienced staff member should provide both constructive criticism and positive reinforcement.

Another example of experiential training is shadowing an experienced staff member during a high school visitation prior to conducting such a visit independently. Alternatively, pair a new counselor with an experienced staff member to review applications until the new staff member is “normed appropriately.” Although we historically have relied on the mentor/mentee relationship, research suggests that partnering a more experienced staff member with a new counselor may be a better solution. At a small college, it may be possible to combine two counselors’ prospect management populations into one and assign the two to work as partners in achieving the goals for each area. Recently, the Dutch-based staffing company Randstad began pairing older and younger employees in what they refer to as a unit system (i.e., a buddy system) (Herman Trend Alert 2008). Early indications are that these “units” are more productive and are a central element in reducing turnover among new employees. At Augustana, we have expanded the unit system to include multi-generational and multi-responsibility teams that we call micro teams. The team approach appeals to Millennials, and the broad range of job responsibilities on the teams creates new efficiencies for all team members.
It also is important to schedule specific training and development sessions for new counselors throughout their first year. Such training constitutes sustained development and confirms the importance of ongoing training. It also provides necessary outlets for feedback and reflection. If possible, enroll a new staff member in an outside professional development seminar early in her career to ensure that concepts discussed as part of organizational and office training are affirmed by an outside training program. Following a training schedule that includes immediate and ongoing knowledge development combined with outside training is a formula for success in training new admissions counselors.

Proper planning and content and timing of training all help ensure success for the new admissions employee. The need to train new counselors quickly makes it essential to develop a program appropriate for its audience and communicating the proper information at appropriate times. Embarking on this path will ensure development of an effective training program for new admissions counselors. Training successes at Augustana College confirm that the professional benefits to and the personal satisfaction of new admissions employees are well worth the investment of time and attention.

**Millennial Training Dos:**

- Do customize the content for their learning preferences.
- Do make clear the expectations you have for their performance.
- Do provide specific examples of success for each area of responsibility.
- Do include content experts in the training program.
- Do consider partnering instead of mentoring.
- Do allow new professionals to shadow seasoned recruiters.
- Do review ethics and professional policies, and probe for understanding.
- Do consider implementing team projects rather than individual work.

**Millennial Training Don’ts**

- Don’t take for granted that they have the baseline of knowledge of past hires.
- Don’t assume that they understand how career advancement looks or works at your institution.
- Don’t forget the importance of ongoing training.
- Don’t presume that confidence equates to understanding.
- Don’t forget to pair constructive criticism with positive reinforcement.
References


