



Leadership



The Evolving Path to Headship

by Ruth Shoemaker Wood, Ph.D.

Fifteen years ago, there was still a common perception that admissions people really didn't know much about teaching and learning. As a result, those with roots in admissions didn't see widespread examples of a clear path to headship. As school finances grew more daunting, as enrollment complexities led to existential questions for schools, and as national voices like The Enrollment Management Association continued to beat the drum in supporting enrollment backgrounds as ideal training grounds for headships, search committees began to take notice. Today, Head candidates from the enrollment world are more prevalent than ever before, and their skill set is recognized and sought out during these difficult times for independent schools.

I had wonderful conversations in the fall of 2020 with four Heads of School who entered their headships from enrollment management leadership positions: **Suzanne Buck** at Western Reserve Academy, who came from a headship at Chatham Hall following enrollment leadership roles at New Hampton and Fay; **Jim Hamilton** at Berwick Academy, who led external affairs at Brooks and admissions at St. George's; **Sally Keidel** at Agnes Irwin, where she previously led admissions and financial aid before leaving for a headship at Montgomery; and **Tom Sheppard** at St. Andrew's Episcopal, who led enrollment at Lawrenceville.

They reflected with me on how enrollment prepared them for school leadership and how enrollment roots offer a particularly powerful lens through which to foster community and belongingness on independent school campuses.

Three key themes emerged throughout our conversations: the enrollment-trained Head as Artist-Scientist; enrollment as training ground for understanding both the internal and external in critical ways; and enrollment as relational, community-minded work at its core.

"The best admissions officers are this perfectly balanced artist and scientist," Hamilton explained, and that translates seamlessly to what is asked of Heads. "It's not a 50/50 all the time, but it's this circle that's always filled at 100% and you can shift the proportions of artist and scientist." Admissions officers on the front lines of working with families are expected to be great artists, to stand up in front of a room and make you want to send your kids to their school. On top of these expectations are assumptions of a deep understanding of data, technology, social media, yield, and how to impact the discount rate. "There was a time when there were way too many kids to go around, everyone was fat and happy, and you just had to be good on your feet. My generation came around and we were good on our feet, but also good on the numbers part. Being a mix of artist and scientist is critical," Hamilton explained. "A really strong enrollment leader is a strategic thinker who can also think tactically," Keidel reflected. "You can't be all in one orbit or another."

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Buck frames the artist-scientist expectation in different terms: “A really good director of enrollment management has to be both a psychologist and an anthropologist,” and those skills translate extremely well to a headship. “You need to understand the individual psychology of students, families, and people you’re trying to partner with. Similarly, as an anthropologist, you need to understand the culture of the school. What is meaningful here? What is the fit between the individual and the institution? How will someone come in and speak the language of our school culture?”

In addition to being able to pivot between artist and scientist or psychologist and anthropologist, the best enrollment professionals understand intimately both the internal and external landscape of their institutions, much as Heads need to do. While faculty understand the educational experience of students, they don’t have a clear sense of how these kids end up in their classrooms or what happens behind the scenes to keep the institution financially viable. Similarly, more externally focused offices like development and business services lack a clear picture of the student experience. Enrollment professionals understand uniquely not only the internal (the sequence of the science curriculum, the nuances of JV-level athletics, and what life in residence halls feels like) but also the external (the competitive marketplace, shifting demographics, and the tuition-dependent nature of school finances).

Today’s Head of School is a “strategic visionary leader who has to think about position in the marketplace and how to keep the school financially viable. If you’ve been in a classroom all your career, you have no idea how to do that unless you’ve raised your hand and gotten into the business of the school,” Keidel explained. This dual perspective that is second nature to any good enrollment professional is a requirement in the eyes of any search committee evaluating candidates for a headship.

Sheppard reflected, “The very premise of enrollment management is the connecting of the dots and the ways that admissions professionals can transition from purely running the admissions process to helping to support a much larger strategic effort of optimizing the school’s enrollment. That can be true at a highly competitive school or a school struggling to find every applicant. You can make a difference in

many ways and that, to me, is a lot of what plays into leading a school successfully today because most schools have to work hard to make sure the internal is connected to the external.”

This notion of connecting the dots between the internal and external work of a school is critical for both an enrollment leader and a school leader, as Sheppard explained: “You’re always the person trying to help everyone see how their work is interconnected. As an enrollment person, you need to learn about both school finance and developing curriculum if you want to be taken seriously. That has continued to be true in headships. I’m doing a lot of the same things—working to help our educational experts see how the advancement and admissions offices want to share their work with the outside and helping advancement see how we can work with donors to make them aware of the amazing things happening inside the school.”

Through the course of our conversations, an ongoing thread centered around the notion of Heads with enrollment roots bringing something unique to the relational work of building community and fostering belongingness and connectedness on independent school campuses. Buck explained that in her role as Director of Enrollment Management at New Hampton, it was important that everyone on her enrollment team supported the work of the institution in a campus-wide way. She and her team regularly substituted for teachers in the classroom, volunteered to proctor exams, signed up for dish duty in the kitchen, and mulched alongside grounds staff. They raised a hand for these roles in order to show support and appreciation for the work going on across the campus and to understand institutional culture as active community members. “Building spirit in your community and being pro-institution comes into play in a beautiful way when you’re the Head of School. Enrollment managers have more experience doing this kind of work.”

Keidel explained, “So much of the attraction and retention to a school is about community. It’s a part of the fit process, probably a bit more subliminal than hard metrics. Enrollment people think a lot about how to get the community to embrace new families so that they fit well and will stay and be successful. Enrollment people are especially attuned

to that, and it spills over into how they think about communicating with the community. It also plays into how they lead teams within the school and how they engage in their local community to create links between the community and the school.” That experience has proven useful in her role as a Head.

Hamilton explained the links between the relational, community-minded work he did as an admissions director and how it’s translated to his work as a Head: “Families want to be somewhere where the education makes sense for their child and somewhere with a strong sense of community.” Enrollment professionals are attuned to that. “From a Head of School’s perspective, you have to be present, genuine, willing to do things that you ask of other people. You have to promote equity and inclusion from the maintenance crew to the most senior faculty member. You have to create an environment in which people have a voice and it is inclusive.” Hamilton talked about the need to be the heart of the community as both an enrollment leader and a Head of School. In both roles, “part of the skill set that you have to have is the ability to make people feel comfortable and be unwaveringly student centered. You have to be able to sit with a kid and parents and talk about discipline issues, disappoint people, hold the line.”

While Heads have historically hailed from faculty and development roots, change is afoot. During this time of political and racial reckoning amidst a global pandemic, against the demographic backdrop of plummeting numbers of private school high school graduates, search committees are recognizing that the stakes are higher than ever when it comes to identifying their next Head. The skill sets needed to remain financially viable and speak in a compelling way to families and the community are changing rapidly. Enrollment professionals have a unique mix of art and science, internal and external understanding, and commitment to fostering community and belongingness. And search committees are taking notice.



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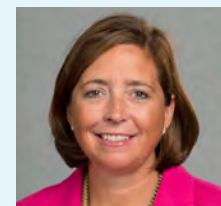
Thank you to the following individuals for sharing their reflections on the journey from enrollment leader to Head of School.



Suzanne Walker Buck
Head of School
Western Reserve Academy (OH)



Jim Hamilton
Head of School
Berwick Academy (ME)



Sally Keidel
Head of School
The Agnes Irwin School (PA)



Tom Sheppard
Head of School
St. Andrew’s Episcopal School (MS)