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Advocating for Higher Education as a Public Good

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Guest Perspective: Advocating for Higher Education as a Public Good



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(NACAC)

The National Association for College Admission Counseling, founded in 1937, is the professional home for more than 23,000 members who serve students in the transition to postsecondary education. NACAC is a trusted source of educational programming and resources that support college counseling and admission professionals in their work with students and families. In addition to serving members directly, NACAC is undergoing a process of transformation to assume a greater role in broader conversations about college access and equity and to become the go-to source for information on the college counseling and admission processes.



Advocating for Higher Education as a Public Good

The guiding principle behind NACAC's reinvention is this conviction—If a postsecondary education is the key to prosperity and social mobility, then access to college should be considered a basic human right. NACAC's September 2020 report, *Roadmap for Change: Reimagining US Higher Education as a Public Good*, makes clear that reimagining postsecondary education with

the interests of students first will require a rethinking of policies and practices across society. Among the recommendations outlined in the report are:

- Redesign college admission policy and practice to focus on the centrality of individual students.
- Emphasize transparency as a critical policy measure to restore trust in higher education.
- Enact public policy that recommits our nation to postsecondary access and success.
- Strengthen policies and practices aimed at protecting students' rights and interests in the transition to postsecondary education.
- Implement well-crafted, fully funded public higher education policies to alleviate uncertainty faced by students and institutions alike.

NACAC's shift in advocacy focus was catalyzed, in part, by the Department of Justice investigation of NACAC's ethical code, which compelled NACAC to move beyond a role of self-regulation. In lieu of this role, the association is shifting its considerable



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energy and passion to focus on education and advocacy efforts – with the media, policymakers, professionals, students, and families.

Confronting Racism and Unconscious Bias

NACAC believes it is critical that college admission counseling professionals be aware of systemic inequities and racism, and that the association assist in equipping the profession with antiracist and pro-equity tools. For more than 40 years, NACAC has offered its Guiding the Way to Inclusion (GWI) conference to both serve professionals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds seeking to advance through the college admission counseling profession and to provide educational offerings focused on advising and recruiting under-represented students. More recently, NACAC launched an Antiracist Education Institute, a four-part professional development series designed specifically for college counseling and admission professionals that increases knowledge in antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Institute features sessions on inclusive hiring practices in college admission and counseling, understanding cultural identity and micro-aggressive office environments, environmental harm for students of color, and appropriate practices and strategies to eliminate bias when advising or considering students for college admission.

NACAC has also begun work, in partnership with the National Association of Student

Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), to implement a grant from the Lumina Foundation to reimagine the college admission and financial aid practices through the lens of racial equity. A panel of thought leaders has been assembled to consider entry challenges to postsecondary education for traditional-aged and adult students of color and examine ways in which an admission and financial aid system would be designed if racial and ethnic equity were the primary objective. The goal of the panel is to move beyond theories of equity and make specific, actionable recommendations for policymakers, which would include a guide for colleges centered around racial/ethnic inclusion, a related guide for postsecondary institutional leaders, and recommendations for federal and state policymakers for an equity-based college transition.

Holistic Admission and the Role of Standardized Testing

Even before the pandemic forced changes in the college admission process, NACAC was taking a critical look at the role of standardized testing. An expert group of NACAC members participated in a year-long Task Force on Standardized Admission Testing for International and US Students, which culminated in a 2020 report that called on colleges to examine their ACT and SAT policies and practices. Most notably, the report highlights the inequities associated with standardized testing for college-bound

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students, which were only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

NACAC called on colleges, particularly public institutions, to make standardized admission tests optional during the pandemic. The association also launched a “test-optional means test-optional campaign,” which allowed colleges to make a public commitment to students and families not to penalize applicants who didn’t submit test scores. The association has also provided guidance and professional development opportunities to assist colleges with making this transition, including Tales of a Test-Optional Year. NACAC also collected data, released in July, that indicated colleges’ in-person and virtual plans for Fall 2021, testing requirements for Fall 2022, and any pandemic-related changes in admission criteria.

Earlier this year, NACAC and The Character Collaborative launched the first in a seven-course series designed to provide guidance on the value of character attributes in colleges and schools. The new course reviews the challenges in assessing character, the core principles of character assessment, selecting tools for evidence of character, determining effective ways to rate character, and developing a sound decision-making process. Over the next year additional courses will be released, covering such topics as character assessment, writing letters of recommendation, and evaluating the impact of character in admission.

Connecting Students to Colleges During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for prospective students and school counselors to connect with college admission representatives in meaningful ways. In a typical year, NACAC hosts in-person college fairs all over the country to facilitate that process, providing important opportunities for one-on-one conversations. In order to maintain that service to both students and colleges during a time when large in-person gatherings are not possible, NACAC shifted to a virtual format. Beginning in Fall 2020, NACAC has hosted a total of 13 virtual fairs, serving roughly 100,000 students. Another eight virtual fairs are planned for Fall 2021. Another way in which NACAC helps students connect with colleges is through the annual College Openings Update. Now in its 34th year, the resource provides counselors, teachers, and families with a list of colleges and universities that are still accepting applications from qualified first-year and transfer students after May 1, National College Decision Day. During a typical admission cycle, many colleges accept applications well after May 1 as a matter of policy, while others continue to have openings available due to fluctuations that occur each year in the college admission process. Pandemic-related disruptions in the admission process for Fall 2020 pushed the process of finalizing admission and enrollment decisions later for both students and colleges. As a result, the resource has

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been in particularly high demand. The 2020 list included almost 800 colleges, and NACAC released the list before May 1 for the first-time in its history.

NACAC's role in the admissions eco-system continues to have significant impacts, and we are determined to support the professionals doing this important work in schools and campuses during a time of enormous change. Our commitment to advocacy, education, training, the cultivation of community and coalition building is stronger than ever. We invite colleagues from all over the globe to join us in these important efforts.

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