

CEO LISTENING TOUR 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“You never feel like you are alone if you are represented by an organization. NACAC has important historical context and allyship among our profession that you can always rely on.”

– Affiliate President Participating in the CEO Listening Tour

BACKGROUND

In a letter to the NACAC community on July 15, his first day in a new position, CEO Angel B. Pérez announced a member listening tour to hear as many ideas as possible about where the association should head next, and how it can serve rapidly evolving member needs. The project was to be conducted with research assistance from McKinley Advisors and, as a framing device, would ask members about their perceptions of NACAC’s *Ad Hoc Committee on Leadership in College Admission* white paper.

The timing and details of the announcement were intentional. Increasingly, there were comments from members that NACAC leadership was not always fully responsive and engaged with the diversity of its members. It was crucial to hear their views first, before introducing new programs or initiatives. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, whose disruptive effects began a few months before the new CEO’s tenure, caused stress within the association and also exacerbated many of the economic and social inequities that were of greatest concern to many members.

The design of the listening sessions was also deliberate. Individual gatherings (to be held virtually) were planned for representatives of specific stakeholder groups because some feared that the association had grown increasingly segmented—professionally, demographically, and otherwise—and thus discussions dedicated to “new professionals,” “special interest groups,” “advocates,” etc., would allow for more frank and focused conversations. At each session, the McKinley consultant would serve as moderator and ask framing questions, in order to free the CEO from the need to present and allow him to focus intently on listening.

PARTICIPANTS

Consultants from McKinley Advisors, who had worked with NACAC during the Ad-Hoc Committee on Leadership in College Admission process, organized the project. In August 2020, they hosted 13 sessions, each enlisting different stakeholders from across the association. These groups included:

Advocates

- Community-Based Organizations
- School and College Counseling Community
- Affiliate Presidents
- Guiding the Way to Inclusion Participants
- Higher Education Community
- Independent Educational Consultants
- Industry Partners
- New Professionals
- Past Board Members and Presidents
- Social Media Influencers
- Special Interest Groups

These groups, along with individual listening sessions between the CEO and current board member, as well as members of the Affiliate Presidents Council, resulted in the participation of approximately 200 people. Following these sessions, the CEO hosted a town hall, inviting all members to participate and provide feedback, and more than 500 attended.

CENTRAL THEMES

Across the focus groups, some common themes emerged:

Strong Support for NACAC: Most participants expressed strong support for NACAC and a deep appreciation for the role it plays in their careers, networking, and career connections. Most mentioned relationships as a major element of the value proposition for NACAC membership.

NACAC Must Drive Systemic Change: Most participants expressed a strong belief that NACAC can and should drive system change through advocacy efforts. Members want NACAC to serve as their voice at the national and international level and be fearless in advocating for the profession and students.

NACAC Must Become More Diverse and Inclusive: Members expressed an interest in ensuring that the membership and leadership are diverse, but that the organization has strong representation from traditionally underrepresented groups in the profession such as Title I public high schools and minority-serving institutions of higher education.

NACAC Needs Mission Clarity: Most members want the organization to grapple with the question “who do we serve?” They want NACAC to decide whether it serves the professionals who serve the students, or directly serves students and families. Members stated that clarifying the mission will ensure the future success of the organization and determine its programming and services.

SUB-THEMES RELATED TO THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON LEADERSHIP IN COLLEGE ADMISSION:

Each listening tour participant received an advance copy of the *Ad-Hoc Committee on Leadership in College Admission: Process, Findings, and Recommendations* white paper. Participants were asked about each of the recommendations, and the following five sub-themes emerged:

1. Mission and Vision

- The phrase “higher education as a public good” sparked discussion and support from participants, who mentioned wanting to see stronger advocacy to reinforce this notion.
- Participants pointed out that NACAC’s mission/vision should remain relevant (now and in the future), taking into consideration representation of all stakeholders.
- NACAC should also use its mission and vision statements to differentiate itself from other peer associations and serve as the organization’s “guiding stars.”
- Many asked for NACAC to be clear on “who we serve” (students or professionals?) and expressed urgency for NACAC to address this in the immediate future to guide its advocacy, communications, knowledge sharing, and other critical activities.

2. Transparency

- Defining transparency and the interplay with communication was a common theme. Participants were particularly interested in more transparency around NACAC processes and decision-making (such as how governance committees are formed, or how to understand the board election process).
- There was a desire for clearer and consistent communication from NACAC to its various stakeholders. Currently, there is uncertainty around sharing information within NACAC. Participants complained about too many channels and a “trickle-down problem.”
- Along with transparency, the need for trust was also stressed—particularly promoting NACAC as a trusted source that has easily accessible resources and information.

3. *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion*

- Participants recognized that this is a crucial area of focus for NACAC, citing that the organization has historically had an insular or elitist reputation.
 - Members pointed out the need for NACAC to listen and include more member voices, not just the most vocal or well-known “NACAC famous” individuals and to strive for greater representation and connection at all levels of the organization.
 - There is a need for NACAC to demonstrate the value of membership to less represented organizations (i.e., community colleges, public high schools, HBCUs, CBOs, and small or rural schools) to grow their presence in the organization.
 - Virtual programming was cited frequently as a tactic to continue to reach out to and better include marginalized groups.
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4. *Knowledge Source*

- Participants want NACAC to be the “go-to source” of information for college admission for experts, media, government, and anyone seeking information about the topic. Some expressed an interest in having NACAC become a trusted source for students and families directly.
 - It was noted that NACAC has an opportunity to develop more easily understood resources (shorter and more concise) that can be delivered in virtual ways, such as podcasts, social media, apps, etc.
 - Many mentioned how “obtuse” and “difficult” it currently feels to locate information on NACAC’s website and platforms (including the Exchange). Participants cited the need for clearer communication on the website and all platforms, with more direct pathways and convenient searchability.
 - A desire for the most up-to-date information on the ever-changing admissions landscape was also mentioned by members.
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5. *Technology*

- There were several key themes concerning technology, including the need to continue to provide virtual programming, to democratize NACAC’s programming, and to make it more accessible to members who can’t attend in-person conferences.
- Respondents saw updated technology as a possible way for Affiliates and Special Interest Groups to engage others (for instance, upgrading NACAC Exchange, ensuring an up-to-date job board, creating a NACAC App, etc.).
- NACAC should cultivate a stronger social media presence and have a more user-friendly website with streamlined navigation that could potentially draw students and families to resources.
- There was a desire to see technology in a research capacity—aggregating data surrounding college admission and sharing stats with the profession, particularly to provide greater access and better serve low-income and diverse communities.

NEXT STEPS

NACAC will share the above insights gathered during the listening tour with leadership groups and staff and make it accessible to all members on its website. The honest feedback obtained throughout the tour will inform and support efforts to transform the association and its programming and policies for years to come.

Plans have already begun to fundamentally transform the membership experience by hiring an inaugural Chief Experience Officer. The incumbent will ensure that all areas of the association impacting the member experience are unified in providing a seamless approach that embodies excellence and operationalizes the organization’s values. Also underway are plans to thoroughly examine NACAC’s communications and technology capabilities to better engage and serve members, students, and families. These major efforts, and many others, will be guided by the ideas and counsel offered by the members during this project. Finally, the Board of Directors will undertake a mission and vision exercise in the year ahead, and will use the results of the listening tour, along with the ad-hoc committee recommendations, to inform the approach and process.