It’s a calling, albeit an accidental one.

Joyce Smith was looking for student affairs jobs in the ‘70s when an admission position opened at her alma mater, Kansas State University. She took the job and never looked back, going on to hold posts at Amherst College (MA), the College Board (NY), and Queens College (NY) before joining NACAC’s executive team in 1991.

“It became a calling for me; a calling from my own experience,” explained Smith, who was transformed by her college years.

As NACAC’s chief executive officer, Smith is responsible for day-to-day management and fiscal oversight of the association, leading a staff of more than 60 tasked with serving the needs of over 15,000 members. In addition to providing direction and support to the board of directors, Smith begins each day with one goal in mind—how best to further NACAC’s mission and use the association’s national influence to advocate on behalf of members and students.

“I feel blessed to be a part of an organization with such strong core values,” said Smith, who takes an active role in NACAC governance, routinely collaborating with committees tasked with promoting ethics and diversity in college admission. “So much in this profession has changed, but our mission remains the same: The professionals who help students make the transition to postsecondary education.”

As she prepares to celebrate 25 years with the association, NACAC’s longest-serving top executive took time out to chat about today’s college applicants, NACAC’s growing membership, and her path to higher education.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROFESSION?

My career path in the college admission field started with a graduate assistantship in housing (on the Kansas State University campus). I was a dorm assistant director, which was fascinating in the ‘70s.

But by doing so, it gave me a chance to work with the dean of students. After I got my master’s in counseling, I was seeking jobs in student affairs and it just so happened a job in admission at Kansas State opened up.

It opened up my eyes to a totally new career path that I never imagined, and I’ve stayed for 30-some odd years.

WHAT’S YOUR COLLEGE STORY?

My college story is one that is probably familiar to lots of people. I came from a large family, I have eight brothers and sisters, half of whom went on to college, the other half went to the world of work immediately after high school.

I knew that I wanted to do something different. I enrolled at Kansas State. I was one of probably 200 or 300 students of color out of a total of 14,400 students on a rural college campus... but I managed to find my way.

I got immersed in the college experience. I was on a high-kick drill team and I started a theater group to get students of color involved in productions. Through my graduate work, I ended up getting involved with multicultural student sororities and fraternities and other campus activities.

I enjoyed my undergraduate and graduate years; they became the basis of who I am today.
HOW HAS THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS CHANGED OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS?
In the last 10 years we’ve seen greater attention to college admission and funding at the federal level, which has really been refreshing. There’s been a goal to have more students attain a college degree. The attention of the federal government, of President Obama, and the current administration to the role college admission counseling plays in the lives of students has been incredible.

The professionals serving students—and the students themselves—have certainly changed in 25 years. We have greater diversity of students in the pipeline seeking admission to college. But we also have an influx of international students attending college in the US, and we have US students interested in degree programs outside of the country.

Another major piece is the changing technology: How students apply, how counselors maintain their data, how colleges receive and process applications. All of that has evolved, and it’s had a major effect on the college admission process.

WHAT HAVE THOSE CHANGES MEANT FOR NACAC?
First and foremost, we have to keep pace with the changing technology. We have to understand the needs of the students, the counseling professionals, and the college admission officers who receive so much information throughout the admission process.

There are also increasing demands for our education and training offerings, and that means we have to stay out in front of the many changes impacting the transition to college process. We have to keep pace through our review of research, and by conducting research, but we also have to inform the educational community about those changes.

More than anything, we have to stay relevant in the lives of the members we serve.
Students are changing, families are changing, and the financing and affordability of college continue to be issues that confront families. NACAC needs to make certain that—first—we understand those changes.

—Joyce Smith

WHAT HAS SURPRISED YOU MOST ABOUT THE EVER-EVOLVING COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS?

One of the most surprising developments I’ve observed over the past 25 years is how colleges review and evaluate both the academic and the personal needs of applicants. There’s so much about the changing student population, whether it’s diversity, cultural needs, mental health, criminal history, discipline records… all of those things are coming into the conversation even before a student sets foot on a college campus. The level of accountability for the student body feels different. And I think that’s pretty significant.

There’s been so much emphasis in the past on just getting in. And the reality is we need to focus on it all—on the campus environment, on the dorms, on the major, on what happens after college. That’s a big responsibility that rests largely with the face of the college—the admission office.

WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN MOST PROUD OF DURING YOUR TIME AT NACAC?

I’m extremely proud, first and foremost, that we still have a mission we believe in.

We’re at over 15,000 members; 25 years ago, we were probably close to 3,000 members—so we’ve seen steady growth. We’re solvent; our revenues have grown and we have a strategic direction focusing our work.

And throughout the years, we’ve remained relevant in the lives of students, relevant in the lives of families searching for explanations and opportunities. Most importantly, the association has continued to evolve, and continued to grow in our service to members.

National College Fairs have been around for over 44 years. In this day and age, you would think the table-top, face-to-face interactions with students would not have the same utility that they did 25 years ago. But they continue to serve a major purpose.

Smith, named NACAC Executive Director, 1997

Smith, dorm assistant director during master’s program, 1975

Smith at the 2015 NACAC National Conference with the four most recent NACAC presidents

Smith, named NACAC Executive Director, 1997
We need to understand changes to financing and affordability of college and share that information with our membership, so they can translate the latest developments for families, and help students make a successful college transition.

WHAT IS NACAC’S ROLE GOING FORWARD IN THIS CHANGING COLLEGE ADMISSION LANDSCAPE?

NACAC needs to keep pace in looking at the changing landscape by reviewing research and understanding the changing needs of families, counselors, and admission professionals.

There are a number of drivers of change we need to understand and translate for our members. Transparency in this process is critical. The influence of outside companies and vendors on the college admission process is one area that we truly need to observe and translate for our marketplace.

Students are changing, families are changing, and the financing and affordability of college continue to be issues that confront families. NACAC needs to make certain that—first—we understand those changes. And secondly, that we share that information with our membership so they can translate the latest developments for families, and help students make a successful college transition.

WHAT KEEPS YOU UP AT NIGHT?

We’ve had a longstanding document—the Statement of Principles of Good Practice—that has served the association well over many years. It’s a statement of what we believe in, how we’ll treat one another, and how we’ll work with students.

That’s been challenged in recent years as competition among institutions grows, so how we treat one another and how we serve counselors and students in the profession is upper-most in my mind.

I also spend a lot of time thinking about how to communicate the importance of a college degree to families.

The work our members do is focused on getting students into a college experience. But, unfortunately, in many quarters, people are now questioning the worth of a degree. The more that we have to explain and defend the value, I think, takes away from the notion that everyone deserves an opportunity to pursue higher education. That has to be our focus.