



SPECIAL EPISODE: “Fight for What Doesn’t Fit: Celebrating Students’ Identities, Interests, and Unique Qualities”

At the 2019 NACAC national conference in Louisville, Kentucky, Jabari Sellars, a middle and high school humanities teacher at the Sienna School in Silver Spring, Maryland, spoke of the unique interests and experiences of Gen-Z students, our most diverse generation yet. He called on college counselors and admission professionals to “fight for what doesn’t fit” in the standard college transcript. He also asks us to “fight for what doesn’t fit the narrative” and to

challenge preconceptions and stereotypes that prevent us from seeing students as they truly are.

Jayne Caflin Fonash: Hello and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded podcast, an occasional series from the National Association for College Admission Counseling. NACAC is an education association of more than 15,000 professionals at both secondary and post-secondary schools who support students and families through the college admission process.

I'm Jayne Caflin Fonash, the president of NACAC. I'm also an independent college consultant who worked for more than 24 years as a public high school counselor in Loudoun County, Virginia.

In September of 2019, NACAC held its annual conference in Louisville, Kentucky where the members in attendance heard a remarkable speech from a remarkable young man. His name is Jabari Sellers and he is currently a middle and high school humanities teacher at the Siena School in Silver Spring, Maryland. He is also, in his own words, a proud nerd. Jabari's talk, which you are about to hear is called “Fight for What Doesn't Fit.”

In it, he explores some of the unique interests and experiences of today's Gen-Z students, our most diverse generation of students yet. He calls on college counselors and admission professionals to fight for what doesn't fit in the customary college transcript, to recognize students' interests and achievements

in an untraditional media such as contemporary film and music, as well as underappreciated art forms such as comic books.

He also asks us to fight what doesn't fit the narrative and to challenge the preconceptions and stereotypes that prevent us from seeing students as they truly are. Here is Jabari Sellers at the 2019 NACAC national conference. Let's listen now.

Jabari Sellers:

Peace y'all, peace y'all. How y'all doing this afternoon? All right. Alrighty. Thank you so much for having me here. Thank you president Alice for that very warm welcome and that great introduction. So very, very quickly, I don't want to repeat everything but a little about myself. Yes, my name is Jabari Sellers. I am a humanities' teacher at Siena School in Maryland, where we are serving students who have diagnosed language-based learning differences.

I am an English teacher. I am a U.S. Government teacher. I'm also the advisor for our journalism club in our newspaper. But above all things, whether I'm in the classroom or outside of the classroom, I am a proud queer black nerd.

Absolutely. One thing that the bio did not have, however, is the fact that last year I served as the assistant to the director of my school's college admissions program, not assistant director, assistant to the director. I was on my Dwight Schrute for a second. Okay?

That was because I was just a teacher who wanted to help out my colleague, shout out to Maryanne Carpenter, our director, and I didn't want to step on any toes. I didn't want to get in the way. So after one year, I gained such a great appreciation and a little bit of an understanding of all of the work that goes into helping our students in our families with this process that can be arduous, that can be fulfilling, and is rewarding. But I want to rest assure you all, I am not that person, and I know we all have that person.

I'm talking about that person who has just a little bit of experience and then says, "Oh, you know, I'm a master at this." I'm talking about that person who maybe takes one trip outside of their country and then comes back an expert on communities and people just because they did one tour. Or that person who takes one semester of a language and then declares themselves fluently bilingual. I am not that person.

So I'm telling you that I am coming from a place of limited knowledge and limited experience within college admissions. But from that place of limited knowledge, I want to thank you. I want to thank you for all of the efforts and hours spent with our families, all of the one-on-one conferences that turn into therapy sessions in your offices every single day. And Lord knows we all need some therapy.

I want to thank you for making ways out of no way for our families. And so, one last time I want to say thank you for what you do for our students and our families before they begin college, while they attend college, and after they graduate college. Thank you all so very, very much.

Now I have a confession to make. So when I heard that I would have the privilege and the honor of speaking with you, I had a decision to make y'all, and I had to decide exactly how many of my hot takes on current events I was going to share with you while I had time on stage. Because I mean, let's keep it real, this is the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

And as our loved poet Laureate and Martha Stewart's BFF, Snoop Dogg says, there's so much going on in the LBC. Sometimes it's hard. So I had to decide exactly how many of my opinions would I give on such topics as, well, I don't know how a privileged family with equally privileged children could feel like a fair shot was outside of their legal reach. It was only two weeks you-all. 14 days. A mere fortnight. They out here playing games.

Or I could talk about how our underprivileged parents of color, oftentimes pathologized, arrested, jailed, fined for also pursuing that elusive fair shot. Come on now. Or maybe I could talk about what it says about our country and how we see women when only the mothers make the headlines, whereas the fathers and the men who are part and parcel to this don't get that same kind of scrutiny.

Quite shameless, but I'm not going to talk about any of that. Not because it isn't important, but because brighter minds and stronger voices, minds and voices that are in here right now, have been talking about that throughout this week and years before. So, I'm going to stick with what I know. I'm going to stick with who I know. And in this case, I'm going to stick with the parents that I know. My mama n'em, also known as Delphine and William Sellers. Look at him, you-all, they just celebrated their 37th wedding anniversary this summer.

And what I know about my parents is that it took one week, only one week in eighth grade for my parents to change the way my teachers saw me, forever. It took one week, one week in eighth grade for me to go from, "Jabari," to, "Oh Lord, there goes William and Delphine's boy." Real quick.

So, I want to tell you all that story, and it starts off in a great time in all of our lives, seventh grade. So, after a rough seventh grade, or as I'm sure we can all agree to just call it seventh grade, y'all remember seventh grade, right? That time when we knew everything, and all the changes that were going on with us and the world weren't that big of a deal, and nothing was too overwhelming. Right?

So after that rough seventh grade, I started eighth grade in all standard level classes. Now the year prior in seventh grade, I was in the AG or academically gifted level classes for my core classes. So that means AG English, AG mathematics, science, and social studies. But this year, for whatever reason, I was now in all standard level classes.

Now for me at 13 years old, it didn't matter if it was a standard level, honors, enriched AP, IB. I see school, at that age as nothing but a distraction from the three things that are most important in my life, video games, comic books, and my cartoons, with the occasional slice of pizza.

So at 13, it really didn't matter that much to me, which classes I was in. And so for the first couple of days, I was cool. That is until my mom found my class schedule half folded up, half crumpled up in the front pocket of my book bag. Now I don't know about y'all, but ever since I was a little, little, little kid, I have tried so hard to memorize all my parents' mannerisms and their reactions to things.

And I did this because I knew I needed to be prepared whenever I had a request to make or some bad news to give. So whenever I wanted some money, or whenever I wanted someone to sleepover, I knew when and how I could tell them or ask them for something. That also means that every furrowed brow, every different facial expression that my parents gave, I could tell, "Oh, wait a minute, they're not mad at me, they mad at my brother." Or I could figure out, "Oh, wait a minute, they're not angry they're just confused. Or they're concentrating."

I could even determine based on the tone with which they called my name, whether, "Jabari," meant 'come and get your dinner, my darling son' or, "Jabari, boy, you better come over here and get this punishment.'

I'm sure we all have some translators in when it comes to our parents in the building, but this time it was different. This time my mother called my name as if she didn't know how to pronounce it. She called my name as if she was reading something that she didn't understand and she was trying to make sense of it.

So, I walk from the living room to the kitchen. My father followed me and we see my mother standing at the kitchen table holding on to my class schedule. Concerned, my father walks over to my mother, grabs that scheduled. He looks at the schedule, looks at my mom, looks back at the schedule, looks at me, he shakes his head.

"Well Jabari," my dad said, "Good news is you can sleep in tomorrow morning because we taking you to school." The next day, my parents had a meeting with my associate principal and my team teachers. Y'all, my parents wanted answers.

And it turned out that I was qualified for the AG classes. My grades proved as such. There was an issue, however, when it came to how well I would fit in with my peers in this particular class. So, to quote the associate principal who clearly did not know who my mama was, "We aren't worried about Jabari being able to handle the material. His teachers are just concerned that the atmosphere of the class won't be suited for Jabari's energy."

Now, I would love to tell you-all the conversation went on and on and on. I would love to tell you what they were talking about after this beautiful quote. But after my mom heard 'suited for Jabari's energy,' I was shooed out of the classroom and I was told to go ahead and get ready for first period. Because up until suited for Jabari's energy, we were having a nice conversation. We were having a conversation with educators and parents and I, the student, I was part of that conversation.

But once my mama heard that nothing was suited for my energy, that turned into grown folks' business. And so since this was grown folks' business, I needed to leave the room. All I know was this: the same day I was switched out of my math and my English classes, my standard classes, and I was put into the AG classes, no questions asked.

I say no questions asked because there weren't any words, just a lot of heavy sighs for the next couple of weeks, whenever my name was called during attendance. I asked my mom recently about two or three weeks ago, I asked my mom about that incident in eighth grade. I asked her why my parents were so angry, why my mother and father were so angry that they scheduled the first parent teacher conference in Sellers family history that had nothing to do with me getting in trouble? My mother said this, real plain and simple, "You deserved the space, they didn't want to make space, so they said you wouldn't fit, and we weren't having that."

In the realm and in the world of college admissions, we use the term fit to encompass all of the factors that our students and families have to consider throughout the entirety of the college decision-making process. We encourage therefore our families to, yes, take a look at things like location, cost, size and course offerings, but we also encourage them to do a deeper dive, to consider other elements of a college. For example, the availability of academic support, whether or not that is part of the tuition or if it's limited just for your first or two years, the average debt after graduation, as well as internship opportunities.

So we ask our parents not to simply rely on the contents of a pamphlet, but also to dig deeper and look at these statistics and the offerings of the school. There is no quick at a glance evaluation of a school because we recognize, along with them, we recognize the importance and the impact of this decision. And this is a beautiful thing that we do.

It helps our families. It helps us in our practice and in the grand scheme of things it helps this process. But now I start to wonder, because we are telling our families, we are encouraging our families to view these colleges, to view institutions in all of their dimensions. Additionally, we are working one-on-one oftentimes with our students to make sure that they are presenting their best selves in the form of applications, in the form of their college resume and their personal statements and their interviews in hopes that they are going to meet and exceed the established and oftentimes restrictive expectations of an institution of higher learning.

We ask this of our families, of our students, but we don't always ask the same from our high schools, from our colleges, from ourselves. We aren't asking ourselves enough if we are seeing supporting and celebrating our students. And so, while our students and families are advocating for themselves by finding the right fit, by finding the school, by finding the community that will speak to them, I'm asking us to advocate for our students in a different way.

I want us to take a page from my mama's playbook when she was faced with a school that said there was no place for her son. I want us to fight for what doesn't fit. Now here's the thing, family. I want us to make two things clear when it comes to fighting for what doesn't fit. First off, what do I mean when I say fighting for what doesn't fit? I mean fighting standards and practices that refuse to celebrate and support the identities, interests, ideas, experiences, and potential of our students.

We're asking our families to have a three-dimensional view of a school. We, in high school, we, in college have to have that 360, that multidimensional view and appreciation of our students. So, that's the first thing I want to clarify. The second thing, and perhaps the most important thing is my argument for fighting for what doesn't fit is far from new.

As a matter of fact, I'm not breaking any new ground as much as I'm moving dirt from space to space. I may be using different language, but generations of educators, generations of leaders have been pushing for what doesn't fit for generations. People in this building right now have spent the entirety of their careers fighting for what doesn't fit in these established and oftentimes exclusionary spaces. So before we move forward, I need to recognize those people. Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed.

The work that you do is invaluable and more people need to do it. We all need to come together to fight for what doesn't fit. The first place I want us to fight for what doesn't fit is I want us to fight for what doesn't fit the transcript.

So, as I've said, I'm a proud nerd. I dabble a little bit. I dabble a little bit. But as a teacher, I love incorporating popular culture and media into my classroom.

Whether it's the underused medium of contemporary film and music, or it's the underappreciated medium of comics, or anime, or television. My goal as an educator is to find the artistic, intellectual, social, emotional, and academic benefits of the media that our students consume and create. Point blank, what my kids are about is important to them and because my kids are important to me, what they're about is important to me, too.

Also, because I'm a big old nerd, I'm usually right there, so hype along with them for the next new album, next new issue, and next new episode. So many ways we just geeking out altogether. But whenever I incorporate material that resonates with my students, like when I taught an allegory class by using the mythos of X-Men, or when I turned my poetry unit into a mini exploration about the foundations of hip-hop, or when I used the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* along with Shirow Masamune's anime and manga *Ghost in the Shell* to teach the elements of dystopian storytelling.

Whenever I incorporated all of these materials in my classroom and into my curriculum, the reading levels of my students increase, the quality of their writing increased, their engagement increased, the confidence with which they spoke about what they knew increased. But this always happened in the vacuum or in the closed space of a unit here and there. When I was able to slide in a book or maybe throw in a movie here or there, but there's always been this hesitation to go all out for a full long course.

Many of my administrators in my past have argued that while we have guaranteed, not guaranteed... Well, while we have emphasized enthusiasm from our students, while you have the numbers, Mr. Sellers that show that there's an increase in our students' performance, we're hesitant to create this class around these seemingly unorthodox subjects because they don't necessarily translate easily onto the transcript.

So, for my case, classes like "Literary Theory through the American Graphic Novel," or "A True Intro into Hip-Hop Studies" gets turned into creative writing or an African-American literature survey to better fit what we believe to be the established traditional workload. And it's not just the admin, you-all, it was my students. My students who had college on their minds more than anybody. And that's understandable. I remember one day when I asked my students to tell me about their dream class. If they could take any class, whether it's established or whether they are going to create it themselves, what would it be?

It's almost as if I was asking the teacher equivalent of if you won the lottery, what would you do with it? But then again, I guess considering the way we teach or rather the way we pay our teachers and our educators, the, what would you do with a lottery question for educators is what would you do with the lottery? But I digress.

My kids came up with some dope arguments and some dope ideas. ‘Sellers, we need a queer film analysis class.’ ‘Sellers, we need to examine all the pillars of hip-hop, a true hip-hop class.’ ‘Sellers, what about video game design?’ They would come up with all of these great ideas and seemingly instantaneously after that they would wash it away because they would couple their ideas with the realization that, you know what Sellers? We're probably not going to offer that class here. And if I have to be honest with you, I'm probably not going to take it because I'm considering what looks good on my transcript. What story I'm trying to tell with my transcript.

So let's talk about these transcripts, and let's talk not only the transcripts, but also personal essays and resumes, because we know how these documents can highlight the identities, the experience and the expertise of our students. But I wonder if we consider how we use these documents not only to steer our students, but also to stifle them.

How do we use these documents to celebrate who our students are, or how do we use these same documents to push them outside of who they really are and perhaps into a box or into a category that is a bit more suitable for us. On the high school level, when our students come to us with their passions, with their pursuits, do we uplift them? Do we find schools, do we find programs of study that we'll celebrate and that will cultivate their ideas? Or do we kindly guide them towards something that's a bit more suitable, a bit more practical?

On the college side, when we're promoting our school, when we're reaching out to prospective students and families, what unorthodox field of study, what seemingly obscure but, "Oh my goodness, is it an enlightening class" are we deciding not to present? Are we deciding not to celebrate?" In our promotion and in our support of our students what do we decide is not worth celebrating? Because I'm telling you, in order for us to fight for what goes beyond and what does not fit the transcript, we have to fight for the realization, or rather we have to recognize that these reports are limiting and they do not reflect our students in their whole selves.

So how do we, in our capacity as educators, as leaders, how do we make sure that not only do we see their full selves, but our schools and their prospective schools see them as well? Well, that leads us to the second fight, because the second fight is fighting for what doesn't fit the narrative.

Now, as much as I'm a big old nerd, as much as I love bringing in new ideas into the classroom, I'm guilty just as much as everybody else as having a favorite book. And I would say my favorite book to read and to teach has got to be Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

I started reading this in college back when I really wasn't focused on college as much as I should have. So the first time that I picked up this book, I didn't really do the deep reading that I should have. Years later, I eventually got hip and I fell in love with this book. And as a teacher, it's always nearby, just in case I need to add a little bit of seasoning to a lesson plan; pull a quote that is a bit more relevant than what we see perhaps in some of our editorials.

Now for my elective, my "African-American Literature and Culture" class, I use *Invisible Man* as the foundational text to examine not only black literature, but black art throughout the generations. Starting with the New Negro period. Then after the New Negro period of the Harlem Renaissance, then to the black arts' movement, way into black comedy and satire and eventually into black superheroes. Shout out to Milestone Comics.

Now, what I get to do with this book with my students is I get them to examine the impact of invisibility: "I'm invisible, understand simply because people refuse to see me." By using this book as our foundation, we get to see how invisibility gets addressed in stand-ups, how it gets addressed in the books, in the poems, in the songs that we are listening to.

Additionally, it gives us the opportunity to examine the psychological impact of not being seen. So in addition to Ralph Ellison's novel, I also use a different article, a psychological study.

In 2000, doctors A.J. Franklin and Nancy Boyd Franklin examine the impacts of invisibility and they coined the term "invisibility syndrome." Now, in this article, in this study, excuse me, they examined the many forms that invisibility can take, but in my class we stuck with two forms of invisibility.

The first: identity and validation, the absence of seeing yourself in an environment or role. I can't even imagine myself in this place or in this space because I have not seen the examples beforehand. We love the idea of the pioneer, but sometimes the pioneer can be painfully lonely when it comes to that role.

The second is monolithic depictions. A person can be seen, but only partially. This is happening when others rely on assumptions and stereotypes to guide their interactions with people who are different from them as opposed to having true exposure to who these different people are.

So here's what I did in class. We looked at these two examples of invisibility and I asked my students to come up with examples that they've seen around them, around the world in which they live that speak to identity invalidation and monolithic depictions. And I expected a couple general ideas.

I expected my students to talk about how some of our commercials and some of our messaging in advertisements can be very problematic and can suggest a level of invisibility. I expected them to bring up the paucity of nominations or nominees of color at various awards shows. I also expected them to bring up the impact of Barack Obama's eight years as president. What I did not expect was the fact that my students were going to share their personal truth with me.

So I asked for identity and validation. I've got conversations and stories about how my black girls were deterred from looking at schools such as Howard, Bowie State and Bennett as a result of some of their advisers pushing for PWIs. I asked for monolithic depictions and my boricua filmmaker who is in love with the camera reminded me that his adviser never fails to have a comment about the soccer team of any school he is considering. Y'all, this boy knows nothing about soccer but put a camera in his hands and he is going to win all the awards.

One of the best things that happens as a teacher is having kids come back to visit. And so I'm getting closer and closer to my first decade in teaching, so many of my students coming back are in college, or they've just wrapped college. And it's amazing what lessons stick with a student. Still fighting for invisibility, or still fighting against invisibility, I have kids in college who are developing their own high school outreach because they have seen their school's diversity plan. And it is working at a snail's pace.

Still fighting against invisibility, I talked to my college grads in their new label, in their new identity as alumni. And they wonder what to make of their role when they consider the school that at best forgot to help them or at worst remembered to hurt them over the four plus years that they have been there.

We at our capacity as educators, as officers, as counselors, as advisors, my question is when is the last time we have evaluated our narratives, our strategies, and our practices for the potential problematic negative effects that can happen with our family? I know that's very abstract, so let me make it even more plain. When's the last time that we have considered or we have checked our biases, that we have checked our beliefs of what a good school is, or what a good fit is for a family or for a student for the potential of not only invalidating our student's identity but perpetuating the ideas of invisibility.

When is the last time we have done that reflective, that very necessary reflective process of how much are my best intentions causing the worst of impacts. So a few years ago I had the opportunity to teach an environmental literature course. So this was coupled as part of a summer course that focused, wherein the students focus on the impact of climate change on the Florida Keys.

So in the mornings, the students would go off to the beaches and into the waters and into the swamps, and the estuaries, and they would examine some

of the materials that were there. They would examine the presence or the absence of wildlife. They would look at things like turbidity and salinity. But then, come the evening, we would all gather together and we would examine prose and poetry that spoke to the beauty and the fragility of the world around us.

Every single class had this great cycle. We would start with a little bit of literary analysis, but before you know it, we were talking about life, what it means to be free, what it means to be your true self. Y'all, these classes turned into therapy, and it was amazing.

Now in one class, we were reading this passage that observed the wide difference between two words, 'quiet' and 'silent.' So I asked my students, "In your own words, what's the difference between quiet and silent?" And they came up with some really great ideas. "Sellers, the difference between quiet and silent is a difference between passive and active." "No, no, no, no, no, no." "Sellers, the difference between quiet and silent is that one is a condition and the other is an action."

By the end of the class, there was no way that we would come to an agreement about the definition of these two words. And we didn't. We weren't supposed to. What we did gain, however, was an appreciation for the differences between the words that we use and the meaning of the words that we use.

Pulling back even further, we noticed the difference between our impact and our intention. So I want to do this with y'all right now. We don't have time for a turn and talk. We don't have time for a share-out, but I want you to consider the differences between these sets of words. So we're going to start off with 'quiet' versus 'silent,' but I also want you to think of the differences between these two other couples.

What's the difference between 'of' and 'among,' the difference between 'invited' versus 'welcomed,' 'acknowledged' versus 'seen'? Family, when we are guiding our students to schools, are we aware of how they will feel on campus? Do we prioritize their feeling and their sense of belonging when it comes to choosing a school?

Family, when we are inviting schools, when we are inviting marginalized groups onto our campus to tour our school, to learn more about our school, do we consider it mission accomplished just by saying, "You can come," or do we make it a priority to welcome them? Because there's a difference between an unlocked door and an open one.

All of us here, do we simply recognize the differences, the idiosyncrasies, the beautiful, unorthodox ways of how great our students are? Or do we make it a priority that not only we see our students, but everyone sees our students, our

colleagues, our institutions? At what point do we decide that we are going to make sure that everything about our students fits, that everything about our students has this place.

In 2019, Dr. Anthony Jack, you all know who Tony Jack is, right? So this brother from HG SE, this brother from Harvard graduate school of education, he delivered a TED Talk entitled "Access Ain't Inclusion." And in his talk, he disabuses his audience of the belief that simply receiving the offer of admissions or simply getting all of your clothes and putting them into the dorm room serves as a sign of an end of a journey.

He challenges us to recognize the need to support and uplift our students not only before they get on the campus, but while they're on campus and after they leave us. I join Dr. Jack and I join the many of us here by not only singing your praises and not only singing your praises about the great works that you do for our families, but also challenging us all to be reflective and inactive.

On both our high school campuses and our college campuses, are we working together to make sure that we don't adhere to the traditional ideas that are oftentimes exclusionary, that we don't just treat our families, that we don't just treat our students as the essay that they write, as the one time interview.

In many ways y'all, I'm asking us, and I'm joining into that chorus to ask us to fight for what doesn't fit. Thank you all so much for your time I appreciate you all being here. Peace of love. You-all are doing some great stuff. Y'all are doing the Lord's work for real, for real. Peace y'all.

Musical Interlude

Caflin Fonash: We thank Jabari Sellers for his remarks, and to you our audience for listening. I'm Jayne Caflin Fonash, president of NACAC. Thank you for joining us for this episode. Please leave a review and rate us on iTunes. Your feedback helps us shape the show.

You have been listening to College Admissions Decoded, a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paola Mardo is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is the show's intern. If you would like to learn more about NACAC's guests, our organization and the college admission process, please visit our website at www.nacacnet.org.

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