

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON CENTERING STUDENT VOICES

**IN THE SECONDARY
COUNSELING
AND COLLEGE
ADVISING
PROCESS**

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Executive Summary

In 2023, NACAC convened the [Centering Students in the Creation of Equitable Admission Practices ad hoc committee](#), composed of both students and professionals, to develop a model for student engagement and a framework to assist institutions and NACAC in identifying opportunities for student engagement in service to equity in admission policy and practice.

The report noted that an opportunity for future research “pertained to the role of students in shaping the K-12 experience, particularly...postsecondary readiness and preparation.” While the 2023 committee focused on postsecondary admission policies and practices, it recognized that extending this work to secondary counseling and college advising is a logical next step — one that both advances the report’s recommendations and strengthens this critical area of practice.

Building on this recommendation, in 2025, NACAC created a new committee to explore methods to center student voices in the secondary counseling and college advising process. The committee, which was comprised of public and private secondary school counselors and college advisors, community-based organization (CBO) professionals, independent education consultants (IECs), as well as postsecondary professionals, was charged with “creating a model for student engagement and a framework to assist public and private secondary institutions and NACAC in identifying opportunities for student engagement in service to equity in the secondary counseling and college advising process.”

The model for centering students focuses on four features: increasing transparency, reducing burden, strengthening student access, and modernizing supports. This model provides specific recommendations for the full secondary counseling and college advising ecosystem, as well as recommendations specifically for practitioners and educational institutions.

The framework included in this report provides an exhaustive list of the secondary counseling and college advising decision making points at which the college advising ecosystem can, and potentially should, regularly involve students. The framework is comprised of the following core components:

- **Searching for colleges**
- **Applying to colleges**
- **Financing college**
- **Enrolling at an institution**

Committee Approach and Methodology

While exploring the committee charge, committee members identified three aspects that would require ongoing discussion:

Definition of Public and Private Secondary Institutions

While the committee charge addresses public and private secondary institutions, there are many “influencers” outside of these institutions who work to help students through the college application process. These include parents, guardians, community-based organizations, coaches (athletic, academic, and otherwise), agencies, friends, and many others who are all involved in student’s lives. Understanding that these various entities are integral to each student’s experience in the secondary counseling and college advising process is vital to successfully center student voices in this process.

Definition of ‘Student’

In order to effectively address the committee charge and especially to elevate the student voice, the committee had to come to a consensus on the definition of who constitutes the “student” population — a process that proved complex.

Within this population, ensuring equity requires attention to diverse experiences, including first-generation college students, low-income students, those from single- or no-parent households, and non-native English speakers. Broadening the definition further, the committee also considered transfer students, returning students, and others. Meaningfully incorporating student voice into an equitable process depends on effectively engaging this full range of perspectives.

Further complicating the definition of “student” is the concept of age. Students under the age of 18 are legally considered minors/dependents, while students 18 and over are considered adults. Discussing “students” broadly can be challenging, as there are many unique subgroups of “students,” each with their own unique circumstances.

Limitations of Executive Functioning Abilities in Adolescence

Early conversations recognized the importance of understanding adolescent development, particularly executive functioning skills, in order to effectively center students in their full contexts in this report. These skills, described as “the skills that you use to develop everyday tasks like making plans, solving problems, and adapting to new situations,” are critical for successfully navigating the college application process. However, as noted by [Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child](#), “during adolescence, executive function skills are not yet at adult levels, but the demands placed on these skills often are.” Recognizing the intense, sometimes developmentally inappropriate, demands placed on adolescents applying to college is essential when identifying best practices for advising this population.

Student Perspective: Feedback Form

To gather direct input from students, the committee developed and distributed a student feedback form (see Appendix A). While the form provided an important opportunity to elevate student voices, any quantitative results provided should be interpreted with caution, as respondents were self-selected by committee members, which can affect the broader applicability of the quantitative findings. Additionally, because the feedback form primarily targeted current seniors, it largely reflected the perspectives of traditional, college-bound students. Engaging this group can be challenging given the limitations of the committee, particularly given that some students may be under 18.

As such, the committee prioritized extracting insights from the qualitative data to inform the recommendations included in the report. Due to the time and resource constraints of the project that limit the full use of the quantitative data, the committee recommends that NACAC conducts a more comprehensive, national follow-up student survey to gather more robust student data. The committee recommends that the survey be sent to NACAC members to distribute within their communities, as well as to students who have recently registered for a NACAC National College Fair.

Subgroups

Early committee discussions surfaced four key themes for deeper exploration in centering students throughout the secondary counseling and college advising process. Based on these emerging themes, committee members broke into four sub-groups, each focused on a different theme:

- **Reduce bias**
- **Reduce application and administrative burden**
- **Resources for students**
- **Support students**

Each subgroup developed a mission statement to help focus their work.

Subgroup 1: Reduce bias

This subgroup identified opportunities to foster student well-being by replacing decision-related regret with clarity and confidence. This can be accomplished by supporting student success by providing the transparency and education necessary for informed decision-making. We hope this approach empowers students by expanding exposure, reducing anxiety and ensuring a better match between a student's goals and their chosen college environment.

Subgroup 2: Reduce application and administrative burden

This subgroup identified opportunities to minimize the unnecessary complexity, duplication of work/efforts, time demands, and financial or logistical obstacles in the college application and advising process to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to explore, apply to, and enroll in postsecondary education.

Subgroup 3: Resources for students

This subgroup identified opportunities for student engagement in the development and distribution of college advising resources, especially those utilized during the college search, application, and aid processes.

Subgroup 4: Support students

This subgroup identified opportunities to make recommendations and provide resources for the ecosystem of individuals who can assist secondary students including, but not limited to, educators, university admissions professionals, peers, and families.

These four subgroup definitions became the cornerstones of our model for student engagement.

Elevating student voice at every stage—from college search to enrollment—creates a more equitable advising experience.



Model for Engaging Students

The committee's work provides a model for institutions, NACAC, and secondary counselors seeking to improve student engagement throughout the secondary counseling and college advising process. The subgroups formed the foundation of the model features:

Increase transparency and reduce bias: Support student success by providing the transparency and education necessary for informed decision-making.

Reduce application and administrative burden: Support student success by streamlining and standardizing application timelines and processes and eliminating non-essential application and admission materials.

Strengthen student access to resources: Support student success by ensuring that resources are accessible and available to students and their support networks from all backgrounds, and that resources are written to the appropriate audience.

Expand and modernize support systems: Support student success by emphasizing the importance of resources for the ecosystem of individuals who can assist secondary students including, but not limited to, educators, university admissions professionals, peers, and families.

Model Feature 1: Increase transparency and reduce bias

A 2023 [NACAC College Admission Process survey](#) uncovered a strong student sentiment that there is bias in the college admission process:

- Nearly seven in 10 young adults (68 percent) find it difficult to find unbiased information about colleges.
- Seven out of 10 young adults (74 percent) believe there is a lot of bias involved in college admission decisions.

This subcommittee examined how current admission practices can create unequal access to opportunities, particularly for students in under-resourced schools. Discussions underscored the need for greater transparency across admissions processes, earlier and more consistent education about college planning, and stronger collaboration with families to ensure students are supported from every angle.

The committee recognizes that many high schools — despite their best efforts — may not have full awareness of the wide range of postsecondary options, scholarships, and financial pathways available. This gap can unintentionally limit student exposure to pathways to postsecondary education. Subcommittee members from postsecondary institutions identified that institutions have an opportunity to be more intentional in connecting with schools and communities by sharing clear, accessible information about scholarships, financial aid, transfer pathways, and affordability options.

In addition, the committee discussed the ways student-held biases, often shaped by family expectations, social media narratives, or limited exposure, can restrict their understanding of the full range of college pathways. Eliminating these biases through support, education, and broadening students' exposure to pathways can help them think more openly, make realistic and informed choices, and avoid the disappointment that comes from narrow or incomplete assumptions about admissions outcomes.

The group also highlighted the importance of transparency around a student's realistic likelihood of acceptance, including when a student may need to consider alternative pathways — such as two-year colleges, transfer routes, bridge programs, or additional academic preparation — to reach their goals. This level of clarity helps families plan proactively rather than reacting late in the process.

Finally, members raised concerns about how inconsistent messaging in various aspects of the college admission process, including around test-optional and holistic review practices, can make the process increasingly confusing and overwhelming the college application process for students and families. The subgroup emphasized the need to simplify communication, increase institutional transparency and accountability, and introduce college readiness concepts earlier in students' educational journeys.

Recommendations to operationalize model feature 1:

- Simplify communication using plain language.
- Advocate for policies that center students and champion equity.
 - Advocate for the American School Counselor Association-recommended maximum 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio.
 - Expand early exposure to postsecondary pathways beginning in middle school.
 - Clearly communicate alternative pathways (e.g., transfer routes, two-year options, bridge programs) early in the process.
 - Include financial literacy training in this early exposure. This could include partnerships with associations focused on financial aid policies and practices to create content. Other topics could include:
 - FAFSA
 - CSS Profile
 - How to talk about finances with your family
 - How to search for scholarships
 - Understanding aid offers
 - Developing simple aid estimators
 - [Example from Washington University in St. Louis](#)
- Develop a strategy to counter digital misinformation to ensure content and information shared throughout the duration of their college search process is student-centered.

Model Feature 2: Reduce application and administrative burden

Student feedback on the process lends evidence that burden can reduce student engagement with the process. For example:

- In NACAC’s 2023 [NACAC College Admission Process survey](#): Over half of students ranked college applications as their most stressful academic experience; nearly three-quarters fear that one small application error could hurt their chances.
- [Ruffalo Noel Levitz’s 2024 survey](#) of U.S. high school students reported that 72 percent say applying to college is difficult, and 85 percent of 10th graders describe the process as daunting, demonstrating that anxiety around engaging with the process starts early. Many don’t know where to seek guidance.
- NACAC’s Ad Hoc Committee for Centering Student Voices in the Secondary Counseling and College Advising Process student survey (see Appendix A) reported the following student feedback: “a lot of college portals are not user friendly and the common app isn’t so common.”

In addition to their regular coursework, students applying to postsecondary educational opportunities must juggle multiple requirements for different institutions across multiple platforms. To effectively center students in this process, it is incumbent upon institutions to look critically on their admission requirements, and maintain only those that provide critical information for their process. Colleges and universities should also ensure that the application process itself is student-friendly, with systems and practices designed to provide a clear, accessible, and manageable user experience that does not discourage students from completing their applications.

Secondary counselors and advisors play an important role in alleviating students’ perceived burden during this process. Appropriate action includes coaching students on critical skills like managing deadlines and application requirements; providing students with clear application timelines and checklists; providing guidance to distinguish between required and optional application components and when submitting supplemental materials is most appropriate; and normalizing that confusion and stress are common parts of the process. Secondary counselors and advisors can also provide tools for students,

Advocate for structures that simplify the college application process as much as possible.

like glossaries, to help them feel more adequately equipped to engage with application and administrative materials.

Where capacity allows, counselors and advisors should advocate for structures that simplify the col-

lege application process as much as possible. This may include aligning deadlines, streamlining recommendation and transcript request procedures, and ensuring that students have access to practical tools for organization and planning.

Recommendations to operationalize model feature 2:

- Develop a standardized method for students to track deadlines, writing requirements, and additional information requests.
- Advocate for systemic changes to streamline the application and admissions process. Collaborate with postsecondary institutions and partners to achieve advancements such as:
 - Standardize deadlines and writing requirements where possible.
 - Provide earlier denial notifications and limit unnecessary waitlisting.
 - Prevent submission of ineligible applications when feasible.
 - Clarify how admission policies (e.g., test-optional, holistic review) are applied.
 - Provide students with realistic indicators of admission likelihood.
 - Improve application systems to reduce student burden. Examples:
 - Create a student-owned “information bank” usable across application systems.
 - Improve integration between CCR platforms and application systems.
 - Embed accessible help tools within admission platforms.
 - Incorporate counselor, family, and current college student feedback in platform (admissions, financial aid, and CCR) development, to further accessibility and usability of resources to a broader group of users.
 - Reconsider mandatory counselor letters; use structured prompts instead.
 - Wherever possible, develop centralized tools to manage or remove barriers to entry, including:
 - Managing dozens of different portals
 - Managing messages sent to students (emails)
 - Students transcripts (SRAR)
 - Testing
 - Letters of recommendations

Model Feature 3: Strengthen student access to resources

While the committee recognized that there are a variety of student-focused resources in existence, they also noted several limitations with existing resources. Namely, they discussed the usability and digestibility of existing resources; the lack of standardization of terminology used in these resources; and the lack of effective marketing or dissemination of these resources. It is imperative that resources are created with students in mind. This means that they are written in a digestible, user-friendly manner; that they are easily accessible to all; and that the information is being shared where students will see it.

Additionally, it is notable that counselors and secondary advisors are valuable resources for students. Steps should be taken to address inequity in access to secondary counselors, including advocating for school systems to meet or exceed the recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, as established by the American School Counselor Association; focusing counselor job functions to allow adequate time for postsecondary counseling; and ensuring collaboration with CBOs, IECs, and other professionals to augment student support system.

Recommendations to operationalize model feature 3:

- Rather than “one-size fits all” content, develop informational content for all student populations, including but not limited to:
 - International students
 - Low-income students
 - First-generation students
 - Rural Students
 - Undocumented students
 - Transfer students
 - Adult learners
- Increase access to resources to support “college knowledge” development, readiness, and application process navigation across more supporters of students. Ensure that these resources are specifically written and designed for each audience.
- Increase visibility of scholarship and affordability pathways, including private and two-year transfer options.
- Promote usage of common language, layouts, and website structures for admission and financial aid portals, to mitigate confusion and amplify support capacity of counselors and supporting adults.
- Promote outreach events (college fairs, campus visits).
- Develop a toolkit for students and their support people, including resources that aid in application completion, including essay writing tools

Model Feature 4: Expand and modernize support systems

Nearly three-in-five students surveyed in the 2023 [NACAC College Admission Process survey](#) wished they had greater support in completing their applications. Furthermore, students indicated that they felt the most comfort in asking their parents/guardians, other family members, and peers for support. Students indicated feeling the least amount of comfort seeking assistance from their high school counselors and college admission officers.

In light of these findings, the committee emphasizes that centering student voices in the secondary counseling and college advising process, particularly in service to equity, also requires centering and strengthening the broader support systems that students rely on throughout their postsecondary journey. This includes recognizing the important role that family members, friends, coaches, faith leaders, mentors, and other trusted individuals often play in shaping students' college-going experiences and equipping those individuals with accessible tools and information to better support students through the process.

The committee also recognizes that effective support systems must reflect the realities of students' diverse lived experiences. As such, institutions, schools, and advising professionals should adopt culturally responsive advising structures that acknowledge differences in family dynamics, community context, access to information, and prior exposure to postsecondary pathways. Expanding support in these ways can help ensure that students receive guidance that is both more accessible and more aligned with their needs.

Recommendations to operationalize model feature 4:

- Improve counselor training on evolving postsecondary pathways.
- Engage more proactively with students' support networks, especially emotional, relational, and peer-based support systems intentionally, providing accessible education and partnership opportunities.
- Develop and disseminate resources, training, and clear guidance to empower students' support networks to effectively complement and extend the work of secondary counselors.



Framework

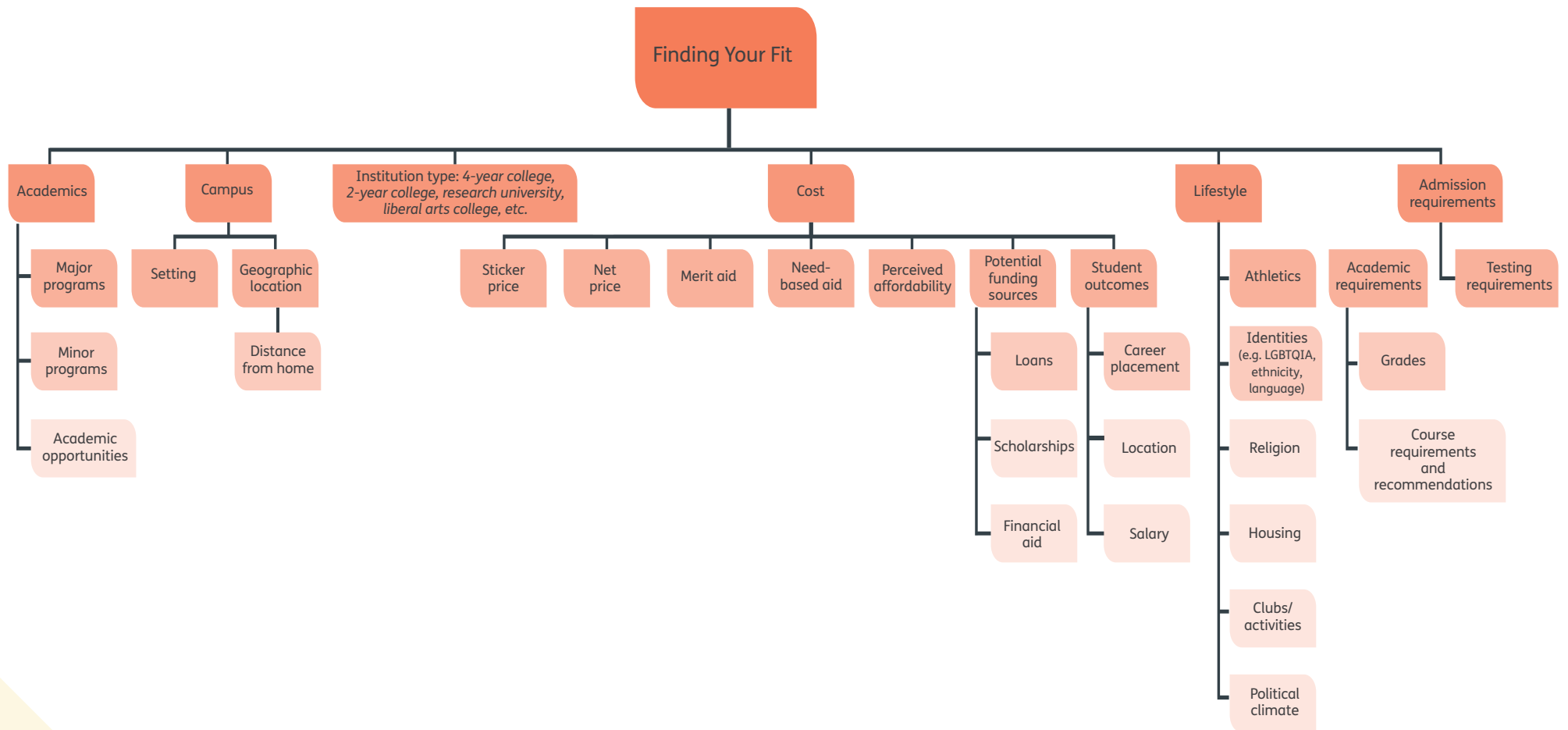
As previously identified in [NACAC's Toward a More Equitable Future for College Admission report](#) and report from the [Ad Hoc Committee for Centering Students in the Development of Equitable Advising Practices](#), it is critical for equity that students are engaged and involved in their college application process whenever possible. The college application process contains many phases, with applicants having to navigate several steps before their eventual enrollment in a postsecondary institution. While individual experiences vary, students and the counselors that serve them typically follow a standard process.

The committee did note that there are certain areas and aspects of the process where students are regularly centered, however, it is imperative that students are centered every step of the way to maintain equitable and transparent counseling and college advising practices. The model above identifies the core principles for centering students. The following framework illustrates where those principles should be applied throughout the advising and admission process.

Searching for Colleges

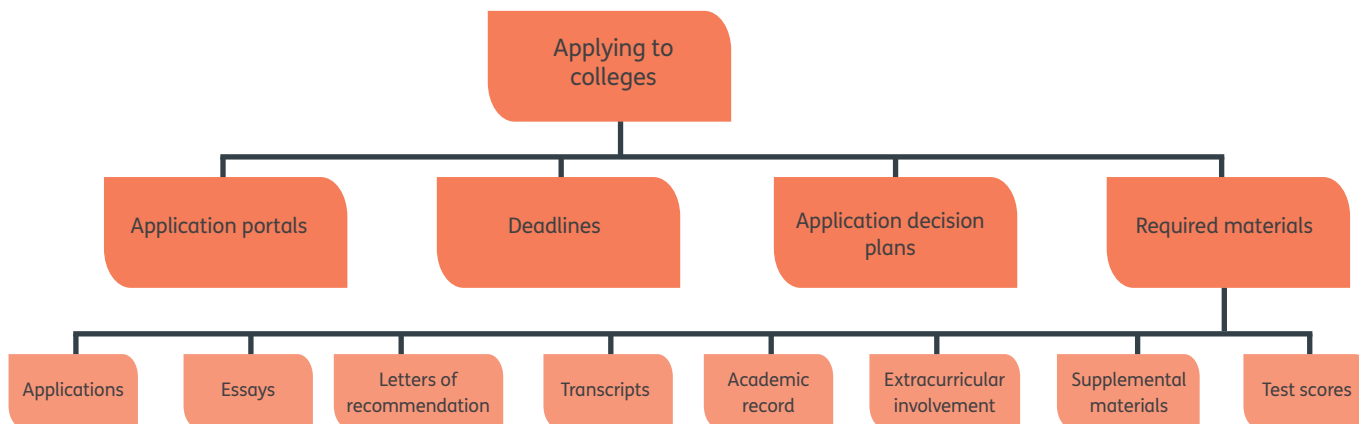
The committee identified steps for the college search that students should be actively engaged in when researching colleges. In particular, in each step below, it is important to consider each student's unique pathway, experiences, and support network in order to guide them effectively. This process is not "one-size fits all," rather, each step of the process must be custom-fit to each student.





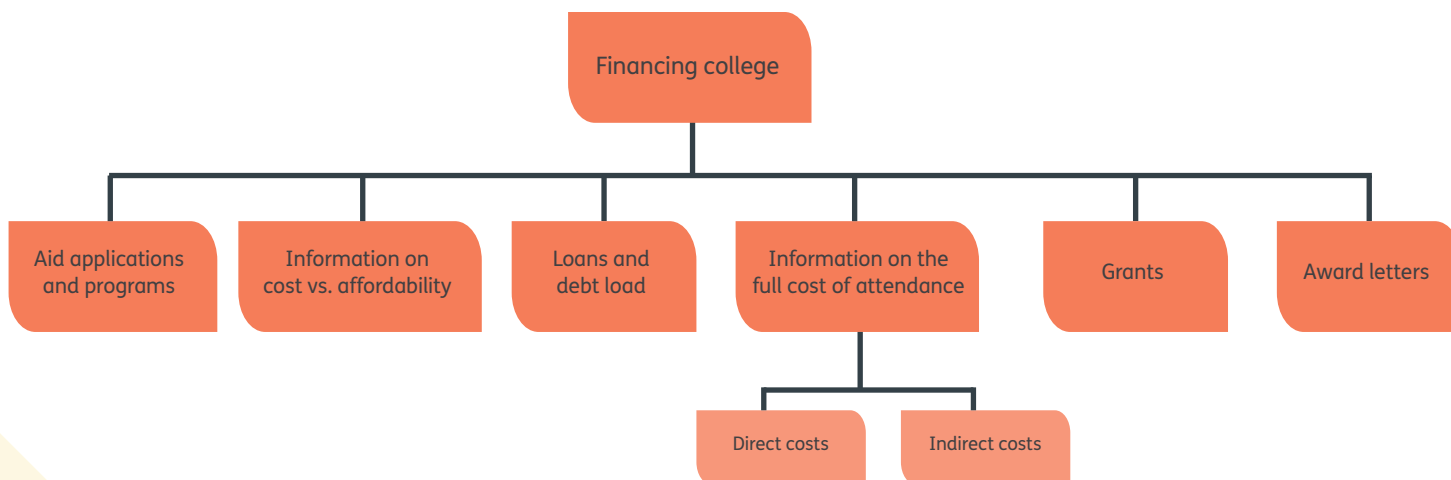
Applying to colleges

For students planning to attend college, the application phase is crucial. The committee identified several areas in which students must stay informed and actively engaged as they navigate the steps required to successfully submit applications to their chosen schools.



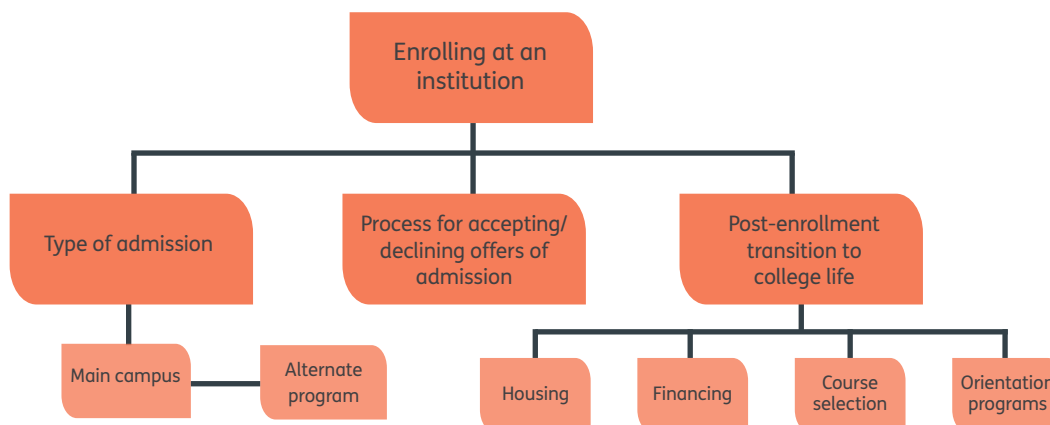
Financing college

Deciding to attend college is often a large financial commitment for students and their families. The committee identified key aspects of financing college that would benefit from consistent student engagement so every student can make an informed financial decision when selecting their postsecondary pathway.



Enrolling at an institution

The committee identified key aspects of enrolling at an institution that would benefit from consistent student engagement to ensure students do not get “lost” in the complicated process, and so that they are supported during their transition to postsecondary education.



Transparency, reduced burden, expanded access, and modernized support systems drive a more effective college advising model.



Furthering the Model: NACAC's Engagement

As a trusted and influential voice in the college admission and advising landscape, NACAC is uniquely positioned to lead efforts that more intentionally center student needs, experiences, and perspectives. Students are navigating an increasingly complex and often opaque admission process, and as noted earlier in the report, many report difficulty accessing clear, unbiased, and actionable information. At the same time, the ways in which students seek and consume information continue to evolve rapidly.

Given this context, NACAC has both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that its resources, platforms, and member expertise are leveraged in ways that are more accessible, relevant, and responsive to today's students. By strengthening direct engagement with students and modernizing how information is delivered, NACAC can play a critical role in reducing confusion, increasing transparency, and expanding equitable access to postsecondary pathways. By doing so, NACAC can help raise the student voice in the admission process.

To advance this work, the committee recommends the following actions:

Deepen understanding of student experience

- Expand the committee's student feedback form into a larger, more nationally representative survey to more clearly identify student's perceptions, concerns, and wants as they navigate the college admission process.
- Analyze marketing data to ensure information and resources are being shared on the platforms that students utilize most.

Modernize communication strategies, especially for the student audience

- Develop new content, and reformat existing content on the NACAC Student Resources page, with the goal of making information more student friendly, accessible, and digestible. Engage students in this process.
- Develop a "Tip of the Day" video series to push out shorter form content to students on social media and other platforms. Utilize NACAC Members as experts for these videos. Suggested topics include:
 - Starting your college search
 - Navigating your campus visit
 - How to talk to admissions reps
 - How to complete different parts of the application
 - Financial aid
 - Understanding how applications are reviewed
 - Understanding admission decisions rounds



Amplify student engagement with NACAC and NACAC members

- Develop formal programs and opportunities for students to give feedback on NACAC student programming - ex. A NACAC Student Advisory Board for current high school and college students
- Engage NACAC members to develop volunteer opportunities to help students who may not otherwise have access to secondary counseling. Possible formats include a call center or a “AMA” style event around key application deadlines.
- Utilize student feedback to re-design NACAC events that serve students (college fairs, webinars, panels) to best serve the changing needs of students.

Strengthen advocacy and student empowerment

- Utilize NACAC advocacy resources to raise awareness of student college access issues in the current political climate, and making sure student safety is paramount
- Empower students with information on their rights and responsibilities in this process
 - For example, by revamping and re-releasing NACAC’s Student Rights and Responsibilities document

Empower students with information on their rights and responsibilities in this process.



Conclusion

The committee's reflections centered on how the college advising process at the secondary level should be intentionally designed to increase transparency, reduce burden, strengthen student access, and modernize supports — avoiding unnecessary complexity while expanding access to accurate information and meaningful guidance. These design goals should be modeled by all involved in the secondary counseling and college advising process. Operationalizing these model features is a critical equity strategy that elevates student voices and ensures broader access to postsecondary opportunities.

Achieving this vision requires coordinated action across the admission ecosystem. All stakeholders, including secondary counseling practitioners, postsecondary institutions, and the larger education ecosystem, must identify and act on opportunities to simplify processes, improve transparency, and center student needs. At the same time, secondary counselors, college advisors, and the student support network, play a uniquely influential role in shaping the student experience and must act decisively within their sphere of control.

By focusing on what can be directly influenced at the secondary level, counselors and college advisors can ensure that students are not navigating the admissions process alone, but are instead supported by systems designed with their needs at the center. Collectively, these steps represent a path toward a more coherent and equitable admissions system — one in which complexity is reduced, transparency is prioritized, and all students are better supported in pursuing their postsecondary goals.

Appendix A: Student Feedback Form

Thank you for sharing your experiences with the college application process. Your responses will help educators and counselors better understand how students navigate the college application process and identify opportunities to improve support for future students. Your responses are anonymous, and no identifying information will be collected.

Have you and your parent or guardian completed and submitted the parental permission form?

- Yes
- No
- Not necessary – I am over 18

What year of high school are you currently in?

- Senior
- Junior
- Sophomore
- Freshman
- NA/already graduated high school

Do you or did you attend a public or private high school?

- Public
- Private
- Unsure

Where are you currently in the college application process?

- a. Not yet applying to colleges
- b. Researching institutions
- c. Actively applying to institutions
- d. Awaiting admission responses
- e. Completed college application process

Which of the following people or groups have you worked with or plan on working with during the college admission process? Select all that apply.

- a. Parent or guardian
- b. Sibling or other family member
- c. Friend
- d. School counselor
- e. Teacher
- f. Community Based Organization (CBO) or other non-profit group
- g. Private college counselor
- h. College or university representative
- i. Online sources such as social media, artificial intelligence, or other online forum
- j. None of the above
- k. Other (please explain)

Of the people and groups listed below, who do you trust the most to give accurate guidance during the college admission process? Select up to three.

- a. Parent or guardian
- b. Sibling or other family member
- c. Friend
- d. School counselor
- e. Teacher
- f. Community Based Organization (CBO) or other non-profit group
- g. Private college counselor
- h. College or university representative
- i. Online sources such as social media, artificial intelligence, or other online forum
- j. Other
- k. None of the above

Can you explain your response? (open ended)

Which online resources, if any, have you used to gather information during your college application process? Select all that apply.

- a. College websites
- b. Government websites
- c. School based platforms
- d. Web based search engines
- e. Social media, artificial intelligence applications, and other online forums
- f. None of the above
- g. Other (please explain)

Please rate the level of support you feel you need or needed for each of the following stages of the college application process. Select “Not applicable” if an item does not apply to you or if you have not yet reached that stage. (Matrix question. Scale: High levels of support, moderate levels of support, low levels of support, no support, not applicable, not aware of this stage)

- a. Searching for colleges to apply to
- b. Navigating multiple college application processes and deadlines
- c. Completing college applications and additional required forms
- d. Accessing and completing fee waivers
- e. Navigating and following up with college portals
- f. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and/or other financial aid applications
- g. Reviewing and comparing financial aid offers
- h. Reviewing and comparing college acceptance offers
- i. Accepting offers of admission

Do you/did you feel adequately supported during your college admission process?

Are there ways you could have been better supported?

- a. Open ended

Please share any notable positive or challenging experiences from your college application process thus far.

- a. Open ended

Please use this space to provide any additional comments you may have.

- a. Open ended

Appendix B: Parent/Guardian Permission Form

Dear Parent or Guardian:

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), an organization of more than 28,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing post-secondary education, is conducting a brief student survey aimed at supporting the work of the Ad Hoc Committee for Centering Student Voices in the Secondary Counseling and College Advising Process.

Your child has been selected to participate in a brief survey about their experiences with the college advising process, as well as their ideas for how secondary counselors and NACAC can better support students in this process. Their shared insights will then be incorporated into a larger report to be released by NACAC later this year.

The survey will be conducted online and should only take a few moments to complete. The purpose of this letter is to ask for your permission to interview your child as part of this research activity. All responses are anonymous, and no personally identifying information, including names, will be collected by NACAC. The information will be used only by NACAC for this study and shared in a report at an aggregate level.

Participation is completely voluntary, and no students under the age of 18 will be included without their parents' permission. Your child may choose to withdraw at any time. If you have any questions about this study, you may reach out to Cameron Hair, NACAC's Assistant Director for Research Initiatives and Partnerships at chair@nacacnet.org. Please indicate in the space below whether you grant permission for your child to participate in the survey. We ask that you return this completed form by February 9th, 2026.

Sincerely,
Cameron Hair,
Assistant Director, Research Initiatives and Partnerships,
NACAC

Laura Fagan,
Assistant Director, Governance and Volunteer Relations,
NACAC