NACAC

National Association for
College Admission Counseling

Ad Hoc Committee to Explore Transparency in College Admission

Committee Co-Chairs

Emmanuel Moses, The Opportunity Network (NY)

Jim Rawlins, University of California — San Diego

Committee Members

Nurah Ahmad, Saint Mary's Hall (TX)

Kimberly Brown, Wade Hampton High School (SC)

Joshua DeBoer, University of Kansas

Danny Irving, Pacific Ridge School (CA)

Ayesha King, Lycee International de Los Angeles (CA)

Sara Miller, Green Halo Scholars (IL)

Sarah Morissette, Alexander Dawson School (CO)

Marie Nocella, Sarah Lawrence College (NY)

Lloyd Paradiso, The Admissions Authority (PA)

Jordan Pascucci, The University of Pennsylvania

Kylie Rigdon, University of Tennessee – Knoxville

Jaime Smith, Online G3.com (OR)

Michelle Stipp, Roosevelt University (IL)

Jarrett Tate, Mount Vernon Presbyterian School (GA)

Edward Truong, Colorado College

Emily Van Dyke, Pacific Northwest College Pathways (WA)

Dawn Wilson, Princeton University Preparatory Program (NJ)

NACAC Staff Liaisons

David Hawkins, Chief Education and Policy Officer

Laura Fagan, Manager, Volunteer Relations

Committee Charge

This committee was charged with identifying areas of particular concern with respect to transparency, with an aim toward advising the Admission Practices Committee, institutions, members, and NACAC as to other potential activities, information, or recommendations that can improve transparency for students, families, and counselors.

Executive Summary

The lack of transparency in college admission requirements, college costs, and expected return on investment of higher education create significant barriers for prospective students. This issue is especially pronounced for students not coming from "traditional" or privileged paths, including but not limited to transfer students, first-generation students, military veterans, international students, undocumented students, students from mixed-status families, students with disabilities, homeschooled students, and adult learners, all of whom may face unique challenges in navigating the admission landscape. Students from under-resourced communities face similar challenges as well and often lack support in their college admission journey.

Unclear or inconsistent communication of requirements, opportunities, or policies can deter qualified applicants and exacerbate inequities in access to higher education. Cost estimates that do not capture the true cost of attendance, including all direct and indirect costs, and the lack of standardization of calculating indirect costs, can lead to a false sense of affordability. Clear, accessible, and equitable communication of admission requirements and scholarship/aid opportunities is essential to empower all applicants to understand the process and make informed decisions about their educational futures.

To improve transparency in the college admission process, particularly as it relates to college costs, admission requirements, and return on investment, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the Admission Practices Committee:

Update and expand the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission*:
Article I, Section A of the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* called The Ethical Core of College Admission should include expanded language reflecting the current landscape around opportunity and belonging, particularly regarding historically marginalized and under-resourced students. This update should specifically address how transparency can reassure under-resourced students that they are supported and welcome on college campuses. The guide should also include best practices for crafting supplemental application questions and clearly articulating the purpose of each question, especially those related to asking students to talk about their diverse perspectives and backgrounds, and how the information gathered will be used in the holistic review process. This section should include clear language around avoiding bias in these questions.

Update Article I, section A.j to specify the direct (such as tuition and fees) and indirect (such as transportation and textbook costs) costs of attendance.

Audit of the resources linked within the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* to ensure the information referenced is accurate and current. For example, the Step-by-Step guide linked in Article I, Section B 1a.

Update the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* to clarify that "students" include all student types as referenced in the Executive Summary of this report. Institutions should be encouraged to actively and visibly consider all student types and make information related to each unique student group easy to access.

Update the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* to include the content NACAC previously provided in Student Rights and Responsibilities.

Update the glossary within the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* to ensure the terms used are current and include standardized definitions for admission requirements, such as the various standardized testing policies (test-required, test-optional, or test-free). Encourage member institutions to utilize this standard language to communicate their test policies with prospective students and discourage proliferation of more variations of these terms.

Update the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* to include clear guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence in the college admission process, both for students and for institutions. This includes specific guidelines on how to make the use of AI in applicant review and selection transparent to applicants, as well as guidance toward best practices for students and school counselors utilizing AI in their work.

Recommendations for NACAC

While NACAC has some wonderful toolkits on its website already, they are not easy to find, and the content can be overwhelming.

We recommend that NACAC create and/or promote resources and educational opportunities on:

Financial literacy as it relates to the postsecondary educational journey:
Direct costs like tuition, housing, and meal plans tend to be communicated clearly in cost estimates. Not all institutions include information on indirect costs, like books, transportation, personal expenses, and loan fees, as a part of their cost estimates. Of those that do, the calculation of indirect costs varies among institutions, with some basing it on institutional knowledge, others surveying students, and some revisiting the numbers every few years.

Given the institutional flexibility, the accuracy of these indirect costs and how they are calculated could vary. Additionally, not all institutions disclose full costs on their websites or on their financial aid offers. This can lead to a false sense of affordability, which can further exacerbate the challenges already faced by applicants coming from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, variances in cost for specific student types like transfer students, commuters, international students, and others are not always easy to find for prospective students.

Work with financial aid-focused partner organizations (e.g. NASFAA) to recommend standards for reporting direct and indirect costs and encourage use by NACAC members. Advocate for institutions to have robust financial aid resources that are inclusive of indirect costs such as books, transportation, and other living costs. Advocate for comprehensive cost estimates to be readily available for all student types.

Participation of NACAC member institutions in the College Cost Transparency Initiative.

Students' rights and responsibilities throughout the admission process:
Update and reissue the Student Rights and Responsibilities document.

Encouraging members to regularly audit their own resources to ensure the information being shared is accurate and up to date: Update resources as needed to ensure consistency with current best practices. We encourage establishing an annual review process for resources and public facing materials (websites, brochures, application portals) related to cost, requirements, and return on investment. Ensure that these audits include not only content review, but also relevancy and accessibility of information. Encourage a specific focus on transparency, opportunity, and belonging. This audit should include an evaluation of the clarity and accessibility of information related to admission criteria, holistic review processes, and the use of supplemental questions. Colleges should pay specific attention to the language used so that the information can be accessible to a diverse audience with various familiarity of the college admission process. Audits should be collaborative and include participation by the appropriate subject matter experts for each resource. When possible, engage students in this process to ensure their voices are centered throughout the process. The results of these self-audits should be shared publicly to foster greater accountability.

Meanwhile, NACAC should also encourage high schools to self-audit, with a particular eye toward reporting practices (such as grading, repeat policies, and course designations) on their transcripts, school profiles, and other relevant documents. Much of this is addressed in Article 1A, l-n, of the GEPCA.

Empowering students and families to understand costs and financial aid options: To better empower students and their families to utilize cost and financial aid information in their decision-making process, we recommend that NACAC has financial literacy training materials for students and families easily accessible on its website. These resources should address topics such as budgeting and managing costs, understanding loan types, and the implications of taking on student loan debt. Resources should be concise, easy-to-use, digestible for students and families, and formatted to be mobile-friendly.

Encourage a specific focus on transparency, opportunity, and belonging.

Empowering institution representatives to communicate effectively with students and families: We discussed the challenges faced by admission officers and school counselors in providing accurate cost and financial aid information to families. We assert that there is a need for professional development and training to ensure anyone representing an institution, including admission officers, financial aid administrators, alumni representatives, and student guides, are confident and comfortable with the information they are presenting. We recommend cross-departmental training across teams, such as admission and financial aid, to help improve communication and understanding. This training could be modeled as a bootcamp (similar to NYSACAC Summer Institute) for new professionals, and regular trainings for professionals, on how to answer questions related to cost, admission requirements, return on investment, student fit, and more. These training courses could be run by NACAC or affiliates. The format could be as simple as open Q&A sessions on how to answer diverse types of questions. Virtual training options should be considered to increase accessibility.

Promoting opportunity and belonging: Develop educational sessions for regional ACAC conferences focused on best practices for transparency, opportunity, and belonging. These sessions should address the current legal and political landscape impacting DEI in admission, as well as other relevant topics that are not only about admission, but campus climate for both students and staff/faculty. Additionally, create on-demand resources (e.g., webinars, videos, downloadable guides) that counselors can access anytime, addressing topics like self-auditing public-facing materials for transparency and DEI implications. These guides should be available in a format easily accessible for non-NACAC members.

Empower institution representatives to communicate effectively with students and families.

Promoting awareness of the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission*: We recommend that the NACAC and affiliate admission practices committees present at NACAC and affiliate conferences to promote awareness and implementation of the *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* (GEPCA). We recommend that NACAC encourage member institutions to promote the use of the GEPCA to all staff in admission-related roles.

Recommendations on communication for NACAC, affiliates, and institutions:

We recommend that institutions ensure language is consistent between the application platforms it uses and its own website, materials, and communications. This includes ensuring consistency across materials utilized by different departments, including but not limited to student affairs, admission, and financial aid.

We recommend that institutions and NACAC provide training and resources for admission professionals effectively communicating requirements to diverse applicant pools.

Address AI Bias and Transparency: NACAC should develop recommendations for institutions using AI in admission to ensure they are actively checking for bias and auditing their tools for equitable and accurate information (including NACAC's Fin chatbot).

NACAC should consider a multi-pronged communication plan to inform members, institutions, counselors, students, and families of resources available.

NACAC should consider a communication campaign with the public about the benefits of education and what ROI to expect from attending college. The outcome of such a campaign could help the public understand the value of college and what to consider in the search process. This can be addressed by audience-appropriate information to share, including:

For students and families:

- A useful and easy-to-understand guide for families and school counselors on how students can make the most out of academic opportunities to increase their ROI, and a guide to financial aid, including an explanation of loans.
- A resource that helps students, families, and school counselors research and talk to institutions about potential return on investment, and things to look for in that research and conversations.
- Information shared at NACAC College Fairs: Make student-focused information available in the NACAC College Fair Attendee Mobile app, at workshop sessions, or available as resources within the College Advising Center. This could also be QR codes that students scan on site.
- Consider sharing student-focused cost, requirements, and ROI resources
- An abbreviated version of The Guide to the College Admission Process, possibly presented as topic-specific one-sheet resources, for students/families to share at events like local college fairs, with focuses on:
- Requirements

- Financial aid literacy training for students and families, including traditional first-year students and non-traditional students like transfer students, first-generation students, military veterans, homeschooled students, adult learners, and students from under-resourced communities.

- Information to know about private and federal loans, including default rates and the impact of debt burden

- Understanding financial aid awards

- Understanding holistic costs of attendance, including direct and indirect costs for all student types (e.g. traditional first-year vs. commuter, part-time students, etc.)

- Return on Investment:

- Why could college be a pathway for you?

- Qualifications for various careers (and point out that it may vary by state) and expected income ranges to evaluate debt load vs. income and ability to pay off potential loans

Utilize existing resources to create a more robust and accessible resource library for counselors.

For counselors:

Utilize existing resources, either from NACAC or from trusted information sources such as those listed below, to create a more robust and accessible resource library for counselors: This will empower them with clear, concise, up-to-date information in the areas of college costs, admission requirements, and return on investment. Include recommendations on a content schedule, or when in the admission process counselors should consider sharing this information with their students. Wherever possible, we recommend limiting members-only content and instead recommend keeping this content open and accessible for all.

As for suggested resources, this list could serve as a starting point and is not exhaustive:

1. Scoir

2. NACAC Step by Step guide

3. NASFAA

4. UAspire

5. College Zone

6. Student Debt Smarter

- Disseminate and emphasize information that affiliates can share with local organizations to aid outreach to public school counselors who are not aware of NACAC and do not get existing communications. For example, NYSACAC has regional representatives reaching out to local areas.

To increase accessibility of these resources, NACAC should:

- Consider an easily navigable FAQ section on the NACAC website that is accessible without a paid NACAC membership. This section will provide easy-to-find answers within the collection of existing data points and resources, including those surrounding issues of transparency. NACAC's AI chatbot should be leveraged to serve as an additional tool to share resources with website visitors that they cannot locate on their own.

- Ensure the language used is clear, concise, and digestible for all. Web resources should also be adapted to be mobile-friendly as much as possible.

- Consider restructuring the website to make information for students, families, and counselors easier to find.

- Amplify tagging and keyword search functions to make website navigation easier.

- Consider whether there are members-only resources that could be made accessible to non-members, students, and families.

Ensure the language used is clear, concise, and digestible for all.