NACAC
National Association for
College Admission Counseling

ELEVATE EQUITY 2023

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SUMMARY & FRAMEWORK

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BACKGROUND

In January 2022, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), published the report, *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access*. The purpose of the report was to engage students and higher education thought leaders in an effort to reimagine the college admission process with the assumption that racial equity was a primary goal.

The result of the report included six practice-related recommendations for college admission and financial aid, as well as overarching recommendations with applicability to each of the six practice areas.

As context for these recommendations, the report noted that, "The effects of racism extend into postsecondary education, as we have known for decades thanks to the tireless efforts of researchers, advocates, practitioners, and, most importantly, students. The effects of systemic racism touch every element of college admission—a process that, at its origin, was not fundamentally designed to promote equity." A critical observation of the process that led to the final report formed the basis for one of the two overarching recommendations. The report noted:

One important observation from this process was that a significant challenge to making substantial, sustained advances toward racial equity for admission and financial aid leaders was the difficulty in getting on the balcony, or gaining an elevated perspective to see the larger picture and avoid the traps of groupthink, inertia, and the grind of everyday work.[1]

As one thought leader participant put it: "I run into this seemingly every day—the question of budget and resources. We don't have enough time to do this, or we don't have enough staff to do it that way. And it really raises the fundamental question: Where are your priorities? It's both the time and money. The question of the competing other priorities and how this gets understood, I would argue, as legitimately mission-central, embedded part and parcel of the institution...I think it's actually a question of psychology and approach that's overlaying in the ether about the approach, intentionality, and transparency associated with these issues."

This participant highlighted that a common challenge in rethinking the design of a system is the tendency to assume that the system's current design is fixed or a "given." That tendency was underscored in this grant process as discussions often turned to how we can better adapt students to the system, rather than better adapting the system to students. As a core component of the design approach, a culture of continuous learning is a critical

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>
> - Thought leadership panel participant

element of any transformation process. To be successful, strategies for change need to be sustained by a set of initiatives to fast-track transformation and sustain long-term behavior change across an organization or profession.

[1] Heifetz, Ronald A., and Linsky, Marty. "Get on the Balcony. (Why Leaders Need to Step Back to Get Perspective)," Harvard Business Review Press, 2002. https://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/product/1667BC-PDF-ENG

CREATING AN ELEVATED PERSPECTIVE

After publishing the report, NACAC believed it was important to envision and put into practice ways to operationalize the recommendations contained in the report. Since decisions about admission policy in postsecondary admission often involve institutional leaders and stakeholders, we believed it was important to begin with the overarching recommendation designed to create a shared commitment to advancing equity across the institution and align institutional mission statements related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with admission practices.

To this end, NACAC hosted a convening with institutional leaders—deans or vice-presidents of admission, institutional presidents, and trustees with knowledge of or a liaison responsibility for admission—in Chicago in February 2023. This convening, named Elevate Equity, served as the first point of operationalization.

Goal:

The goal of this convening was to continue momentum created by the *NACAC-NASFAA Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access* report by operationalizing the report's framework. An Elevate Equity participant reinforced the fundamental point underscored by the NACAC-NASFAA report by noting that "threaded points throughout the (college admission) system remain from the original design," producing inequities that are baked into the work of college admission. Operationalizing the framework constitutes a concrete next step for institutional stakeholders, leaders, and policymakers to contemplate new designs and begin implementing steps toward greater equity in postsecondary education.

Objectives:

To operationalize the report's framework for the intended stakeholders, the convening was designed to 1) continue a constructive conversation among a demographically and professionally diverse group of the stakeholders for whom the report was written, 2) progress from framework to concrete steps that admission and financial aid offices, institutional leadership, and policymakers can implement, and 3) stress test the framework and operationalization procedures to ensure that they withstand professional scrutiny.

The Elevate Equity convening was a facilitated symposium with project stakeholders to explore four primary recommendations related to college admission policy and practice from the 2022 report, including 1) the application process, 2) factors used in making admission decisions, 3) the composition of the admission office, and 4) institutional selectivity. We also sought to create a list of key concepts and questions against which institutions can begin to evaluate/assess equity implications of admission policies and practices.

Elevate Equity participants discuss challenges and opportunities on the strategic admission topics presented at the convening.

To achieve our objectives, we:

1 Assembled a demographically and professionally diverse group of the stakeholders identified in the report as being critical to positive change, including admission and financial aid officers, university leaders and administrators, policymakers or policy experts, students, and others.

2 Conducted an initial overview and discussion of the report.

3 Utilized group discussions centered around the core areas of the report to design questions and procedures for evaluating design challenges, equity barriers, and equity levers on an institutional level.

4 Combined group outputs into a full report and evaluation framework.

GETTING ON THE BALCONY
ENSURING MISSION AND ADMISSION POLICY ALIGNMENT ON EQUITY

This session explored the institutional and leadership dynamics involved in our success or failure at affording institutional leadership the critical opportunity to assess equity initiatives from a high level, outside of the day-to-day rigors of institutional operations. This discussion framed the work participants engaged in throughout the entire convening.

The session focused on three primary concepts:

▶ defining balcony time in the context of higher education institutions,

▶ presenting common challenges to balcony time in service of equity, and

▶ providing examples of successful strategies to create and preserve balcony time in service of equity.

Strategic Planning Questions

1. How well aligned are the institution's recruitment, admission, and enrollment management policies and practices with the institution's mission, particularly with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion? Where are notable points of alignment, as well as of misalignment?

2. Does the institution dedicate time systemically to discussing this alignment or misalignment during a given year? In what settings are these conversations conducted? What guiding documents serve as the baseline for shaping those conversations?

3. What challenges does the institution face in aligning the mission-based equity initiatives with recruitment, admission, and enrollment management policies and practices?

4. What are one to three new ideas for getting the institution's leadership on the balcony to discuss this alignment more often?

Working Group Questions

1. What challenges can you identify to advancing equity-centered conversations or making strides toward improved equity?

2. Are there promising practices your institution has identified to address such challenges that could be used at other institutions?

3. What additional steps—whether unique or in common with others in your group—did you identify in the working group time that you can pursue at your institution?

CHALLENGES

Institutional DEI Connectivity:

Campus DEI offices are not sufficiently connected to key offices, including the admission office, faculty, and provost/administration leadership. Similarly, DEI commitments in institutional mission statements and other governing documents are not necessarily connected to admission policy and practice.

Policy Support and Funding:

Lack of funding and support for equity from policy-makers—or active attempts to defund or deemphasize equity—at the state level[2], as well as insufficient institutional funding or support can undermine DEI efforts. For public institutions, participants noted the conflict between recruiting out-of-state students for revenue purposes as a competitive influence against recruiting in-state students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Lack of Time:

As articulated in the 2022 report, administrators reinforced that senior institutional leadership often lacks the time and space to get on the balcony to plan strategically for new equity initiatives, among other topics.

Equity as a Strategic/Mission Priority:

Among the many strategic goals of an institution, participants noted that elevating equity to a strategic priority can be challenging. Some participants noted that equity was not a campus-wide priority even if there was discussion in the admission context. Importantly, participants also pointed out two potential challenges at the highest level of the institution—lack of clarity or focus in the institution's mission and a lack of board/trustee alignment on the institution's commitment to equity. Participants also placed a high premium on inclusivity during the process of strategic planning for equity.

Institutional Organization of Support for Equity in Admission:

Participants noted that the admission office can be viewed as a scapegoat for failure to reach equity goals for enrollment, rather than placing the focus on institutional culture. Inherent in this orientation is the absence of other key players who, acting in concert, are essential to improving equity in college access. These include, but are not limited to, financial aid administrators, DEI officers, administrators, student affairs, university attorneys, and faculty.

Missing Follow-Through and Data:

Participants noted that it was difficult to organize conversations about equity in the absence of clear plans to follow through on institutional plans or commitments, particularly when there were not measurable objectives attached to equity plans.

Lack of Awareness of Student Demographics:

At a high level, participants felt that institutional stakeholders lacked knowledge about the changing nature of student demographics, the relationship of changing demographics to differential access, and how those factors intersect with enrollment success. Without such understanding, participants related difficulty in motivating or organizing institutional leaders to discuss the need for equity conversations. For institutions to thrive in the future, participants indicated that it was often difficult to engage in high-level discussions to orient the institutional mindset to account for these changes.

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[2] At the time this report was written, 20 states had introduced legislation restricting DEI activity at public postsecondary institutions. Such bills had been passed and signed by the governor in three of those states: Florida, Tennessee, and North Dakota. (Chronicle of Higher Education, "DEI Legislation Bill Tracker," May 2023 ,17) NACAC is opposed to such legislative initiatives, as they contradict the association's core values of fairness, social responsibility, education, and equity. Such initiatives, even if unsuccessful in the legislature, impose a chilling effect on higher education administrators.

OPPORTUNITIES

Definition and Articulation:

Institutional leadership can clearly define and articulate their strategic DEI goals overall and for recruitment and enrollment, which will allow institutional administrators and practitioners to develop objectives and strategies with measurable outcomes.

Alignment:

Institutional leaders can align pockets of DEI leaders and practitioners across campus divisions to develop and meet DEI enrollment goals. Participants mentioned multiple points of alignment that can be achieved with balcony-level thinking, including connecting DEI directors to the enrollment process, bringing together faculty and co-curricular staff, and aligning central communications offices and DEI enrollment initiatives. In addition, aligning institutional DEI goals with state or system policy goals, which typically focus on improving enrollment rates in the state, provides policy grounding for institutional action.

Development and Advancement:

Institutional leaders engaged in a broad DEI strategy can initiate development campaigns to help secure financial assistance needed to shore up staffing, programs, and resources required to achieve DEI enrollment goals.

Future-Focused Conversation:

At the governance and senior leadership levels, engaging in future-focused conversation about the future population of students and institutional well-being is an obligation. Providing a road map to a student pipeline, particularly for students currently missing from campus, to serve the institution over the next 20 to 30 years will help ensure sustainability and equitable access. Participants also emphasized the importance of board leadership in aligning financial aid policy with institutional equity goals for enrollment.

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Permission:

A commitment to inquiry and exploration of new ideas for admission, ranging from recruitment and application strategies to rethinking admission requirements, is a powerful tool to encourage practitioners and other stakeholders to innovate in the design and implementation of admission policies.

Integrating Students:

Engaging students, particularly underrepresented students, at the highest-level of decision-making can incorporate fresh perspectives from the institution's most important constituents.

Regular Discussion and Community-Building:

As with the original recommendation from NACAC's 2022 report, the habit of getting on the balcony will generate momentum and build a community around discussions about DEI and enrollment. Moreover, modeling this behavior at the highest levels of the institution will enable and encourage individual offices to do the same in service to equity. Conducting such conversations off-site to emphasize the separation from day-to-day work can encourage innovative thinking and collaboration. Participants also recommended forming external advisory bodies consisting of underrepresented constituents and other stakeholders adjacent to higher education policy with respect to equity.

ADMISSION OFFICE STAFF
THE FACE OF THE INSTITUTION

Students who took part in the NACAC-NASFAA project on reimagining college admission from an equity perspective expressed a fundamental disconnect between themselves, as students of color, and college admission officers. As a result, NACAC has recommended a concerted effort to diversify the admission office, institute DEI initiatives for admission officers on a significantly broader scale, and more consistently involve students in the admission office's planning and decision-making processes. This panel discussed the future workforce dynamics of a DEI-ready admission office, strategies for implementing hiring and training programs, and the importance of identifying and cultivating future leaders who are equipped to thrive with a more diverse student population.

Strategic Planning Questions

1. How do the demographic characteristics of your admission office align with the current student population and with the population of students who you seek to recruit?

2. What is your institution's primary pipeline for future admission staff? Are there ways to expand the pipeline?

3. How frequently do the admission staff work with campus DEI staff? How might this relationship be strengthened?

4. What are one to three new ideas for cultivating a diverse and DEI-ready admission workforce?

Working Group Questions

1. In the previous working group session, what challenges did you identify to advancing equity-centered conversations or making strides toward improved equity?

2. Are there promising practices your institution has identified to address such challenges that could be used at other institutions?

3. What additional steps—whether unique or in common with others in your group—did you identify in the working group time that you can pursue at your institution?

CHALLENGES

Composition:

Participants noted that the admission offices at many colleges do not currently reflect the diversity of existing or future student bodies at the institution.

Lack of Resources:

Participants noted that many admission offices lack the depth of resources required to support students and families in the recruitment and enrollment process. Participants discussed barriers that include, but are not limited to, transportation to campus, visits to schools, time for one-on-one conversations, and the availability of admission information in multiple languages.

Pipeline Cultivation:

Related to composition, participants observed challenges in identifying, attracting, and retaining future admission professionals from underrepresented populations. Moreover, there is currently no academic or professional track leading to the admission profession. Most professionals report falling into the profession.

Compensation:

Participants overwhelmingly cited downward pressure on admission salaries and budgets, particularly in the face of increasing professional demand, as a barrier to hiring and retaining new professionals in general, but especially for hiring a diverse workforce. In addition, the work required to cultivate and sustain equity initiatives requires an investment of time and expertise to ensure effectiveness.

Professional Development:

Participants emphasized that there is currently little support for or a shortage of available professional development programs for admission staff on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Likewise, participants noted a lack of strong DEI onboarding resources for new staff.

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Definition and Application of DEI:

Participants expressed the need for a level of care and clarity to ensure that admission staff are properly oriented for diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI efforts need to be sustained, not just performative or conducted for the purpose of checking a box. DEI strategy should also be infused throughout admission office strategy, not confined or isolated in a single position or priority. Participants identified as challenges both the box-checking mentality and the tendency to isolate DEI functions in both strategy and staffing.

Lack of Institutional DEI Connectivity:

As in the prior section, participants noted that the lack of a strong connection between institutional DEI offices and admission offices was a challenge to ensuring admission offices are DEI-ready.

Leadership Dynamics:

As referenced earlier, policies attempting to censor, eliminate, or otherwise detract from diversity, equity, and inclusion represent a significant obstacle to candid, informed conversation about future professional and student needs. In addition, participants mentioned that admission and administrative leaders within institutions may not fully realize the power they have to implement hiring changes.

OPPORTUNITIES

Education for Professionals:

Participants identified that the creation and implementation of new DEI education for admission professionals represented a promising future opportunity for institutions and national organizations alike. Likewise, institutions, as well as states, must continue to maintain support for education opportunities in this area to ensure that colleges and universities are well-prepared to serve an increasingly diverse population of students and families. Finally, participants encouraged institutions to utilize cultural centers on campus to help onboard new admission officers with DEI training.

Diversify Hiring:

There is a clear opportunity to be intentional about tending to the diversity of the admission office in ways that reflect the population of students and families that the institution will serve, both in the present and future. Ensuring that opportunities to work with the admission office—beginning with campus tour guide and student worker positions—are disseminated equitably throughout the campus can be an effective way of constructing the workforce pipeline. Aligning the hiring policy and process with institutional DEI goals will help ensure continuity between mission-based goals and implementations. Moreover, participants noted that a secondary effect of diversifying the composition of the admission office would be that the new cultural norms and expectations could help re-shape office norms and practices.

Strategic Action in the Admission Office:

Participants pointed to a range of opportunities to act strategically in service to DEI in the admission office. As with other areas in this report, participants emphasized the need for integration of DEI in all admission offices policies and practices, as opposed to vesting responsibility for DEI in a single staff member or initiative.

Expand Professional Recruiting Horizons:

Participants believe that expanding professional recruitment pipelines held some promise, including actively recruiting students and graduates from adjacent disciplines and professions, such as education, marketing and communications, DEI studies, and other fields related to higher education access and institutional recruitment. Participants also suggested engaging with alumni to strengthen professional recruitment pipelines.

Staff Retention and Development for Leadership:

The college admission profession is experiencing structural stressors in 2023 that stem from a high-pressure work environment, the non-stop pace of recruitment, multiple and often conflicting demands, constant budget pressure, and relatively low pay—all of which contribute to a challenging environment for recruiting and retaining admission office staff. Amid these challenges, participants felt that there is ample opportunity to strengthen the pipeline into the admission profession, particularly for underrepresented professionals; to develop training on DEI initiatives for staff; to improve retention among current staff, particularly among underrepresented professionals; and to provide transparent leadership and development of new leaders.

Proximity to Students:

Participants noted that partnering with student organizations and marketing to current students about the admission profession as an employment option after college presents easy access to an audience of future professionals. Participants also encouraged colleges to consider engaging current students in the process of recruitment and retention. The U.S. Department of Education recently issued guidance for the Federal Work-Study program that encouraged colleges to utilize work-study funds to support student outreach to K-12 schools and students. Similar use can be made of such funds to support the transition to postsecondary education.[3]

Leverage Partnerships:

Leveraging partnerships with high schools, community-based organizations, and college access programs like GEAR UP and TRIO could enable fruitful recruiting outcomes and provide opportunities for professionals in those settings to work directly with the admission office.

Remote Work Opportunities:

Some participants noted that, post-pandemic, the opportunity to provide remote work opportunities opened new doors for greater diversity and inclusivity in hiring.

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[3] Dear Colleague Letter to Colleges and Secondary School Districts, May 2023 ,10. See: https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/230510.html

RETHINKING SELECTIVITY

The recent Supreme Court ruling against race-conscious college admission, as well as persistent inequities in access to higher education, beg the question about the role selectivity—real or perceived— plays in limiting progress toward greater equity. This panel (convened prior to recent ruling) discussed the potential contours of the court's decision, research on admission practices that run counter to equity, and ways in which institutions can reexamine their admission policies and practices to right-size the impression of selectivity and exclusivity from the student perspective.

ASSESSING INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The factors that colleges utilize in making admission decisions have remained remarkably consistent—some might say stagnant—over the past three decades, with the notable exception of the test-optional movement during the pandemic. New research and emerging practices in education are leading to a more nuanced understanding of student achievement and innovative practices in evaluating student knowledge, talents, skills, and strengths. This panel provided examples of how potential changes to our thinking about evaluating students for admission could lead to a significantly more contextualized understanding of students who are interested in enrolling. We will explore how our commonly held notions of what constitutes rigorous academic coursework need refreshing.

Strategic Planning Questions

1. How does the institution communicate accessibility and/or exclusivity? Does terminology in your recruitment and admission processes convey exclusivity in unintended ways?

2. What are enrollment-related barriers (over which your institution has control) to fully achieving institutional equity goals? For admission practices that inhibit equity, are there pressures that the institution's leadership can work collectively to alleviate so such practices can be modified or eliminated?

3. Does the institution regularly and systemically conduct reviews of admission requirements with faculty and institutional leaders? To what end? And how (if at all) do those conversations shape the evolution of enrollment policy and practice?

4. How well are admission requirements aligned with mission-based goals and objectives? Are there points of tension between mission aims and equity goals that affect admission policy design?

5. What are one to three new ideas for ensuring that the institution's educational objectives are aligned with admission requirements in ways that more fully support equity aims?

Working Group Questions

1. In the previous working group session, what challenges did you identify to advancing equity-centered conversations or making strides toward improved equity?

2. Are there promising practices your institution has identified to address such challenges that could be used at other institutions?

3. What additional steps toward more equity-focused outcomes—whether unique or in common with others in your group—did you identify in the working group time that you can pursue at your institution?

CHALLENGES

Public Perception of Selectivity as Quality:

The public perception of selectivity as an indicator of institutional quality was a frequently mentioned challenge during the convening. A wide range of stakeholders place an inordinate amount of emphasis on maintaining selectivity, and by extension, the status quo in admission. As such, altering course on institutional selectivity will require communication with broad audiences to ensure successful understanding and buy-in.

Communications:

Participants noted that articulating clear and understandable messages about holistic admission and new/revised admission philosophies can be a challenge. Institutions could require the backing of national organizations to help set a new framework for our collective understanding of college admission.

Faculty Culture:

Participants noted the importance of faculty culture with respect to admission policy at many institutions. Participants first noted varying degrees of faculty involvement: Some cited a desire for increased faculty engagement; others cited active resistance to change by some faculty, which can stymie change for long periods of time. Some participants cited the faculty's desire for rigor in admission without a deep consideration or understanding of the definition of rigor and/or the unequal availability of coursework in American high schools.[4] Finally, the presence of varying interests and perpectives at the academic departmental level further complicate efforts to ensure equity in admission requirements. No matter the case, the role of faculty in helping to leverage equity in college access will be critical.

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State Policies for College Admission:

Participants noted that at public institutions, state policy dictating admission criteria, including standardized admission test scores, GPA, and curricular requirements, constitutes a unique barrier to change. As noted in the NACAC-NASFAA report, engaging state policymakers and administrators will be a key strategy to ensuring that admission criteria reflect institutional and system goals for equity.

Sustainability:

Many participants pointed out the difficulty they have in balancing financial goals/needs (i.e., enrollment goals) and equity initiatives. Pointedly, some participants posed the question bluntly: "How do we sustain our (equity) goals for enrollment and retention without money?" Some institutions noted that their mission-based commitment to equity was generally aligned with admission policy and practice, but were encountering significant financial challenges to sustain momentum. Similarly, participants noted that reconciling institutional aid with equity goals was a significant challenge.

Inequitable Academic Preparation:

A frequently cited barrier to changing admission criteria is the uneven preparation afforded to students in the tens of thousands of K-12 schools feeding into postsecondary education. Participants noted that first-year curricula at postsecondary institutions can be inflexible and does not reflect either the inequities in the K-12 system or respond nimbly to changes in academic fields. Participants also shared that colleges could lack a sense of urgency about examining the whole student (cura personalis) in the admission process, as opposed to the status quo that exists in many institutions.

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[4] U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (16-2015 .(2018 civil rights data collection: STEM course taking. https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/stem-course-taking.pdf

OPPORTUNITIES

Rethink Admission Requirements:

Participants noted several areas where admission requirements could be reassessed and/or changed in service to equity, including:

► Test-optional or test-free admission

► Eliminating or making recommendation letters optional

► Reassessing math requirements

► Utilizing work that students completed in high school, rather than requiring them to create new work; leveraging students' strengths across multiple measures

► Creating a pilot program to explore alternative materials for admission consideration

► Connecting admission requirements to placement and advising

Approach to Student Aid:

Participants pointed to the need for a holistic approach to institutional aid policies and allocations to attempt to maximize aid for students in need to improve socioeconomic equity. This includes rethinking academic requirements for state and/or institutional aid, including standardized test score requirements for aid when many, if not most, institutions have adopted test-optional admission policies.

Transparency and Simplification:

Participants noted that institutions could continue to improve transparency by more clearly articulating admission requirements; the purpose of requirements and connection to student success and/or fit at the institution; and the process for making admission decisions. In addition, participants recognized the opportunity to streamline processes to minimize the burden of applying to college.

Proactive Promotion of DEI Goals:

Articulating DEI goals to all stakeholders, including applicants, is an opportunity to provide clarity and transparency to students and families about how the institution's

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mission and goals intersect with the criteria considered for admission. Articulating these goals also has the potential to promote greater understanding of how admission decisions are made, particularly in the case of holistic review.

Partnering with Faculty:

Take advantage of the proximity to higher education faculty to share evolving trends in academic disciplines, analyze and interpret data related to the recruitment and admission processes, and create admission requirements that adapt to the changing educational landscape. Establish regular meetings with key faculty representatives to establish balcony conversations with them and ensure that admission requirements meet current, data-informed academic standards.

REDUCING THE APPLICATION BURDEN

Over the past several years, colleges and the organizations that support them with application services have raised significant questions about how to reduce the burden of applying to college and how to better capture a holistic view of applicants. This panel shared information about the ways in which the college application is changing and how colleges can better utilize resources to prevent underrepresented students from climbing what can be an insurmountable barrier to postsecondary access.

Strategic Planning Questions

1. How much of the college admission office's burden could be alleviated with a more streamlined student matching system?

2. Of the information that you collect from students via the current application, how much is significantly important in making admission decisions? Similarly, does your institution (or how does your institution) measure the effectiveness of that information in predicting student success?

3. If your institution charges an application fee, how critical is that funding for your institution? Are there other ways this revenue could be generated?

4. What are one to three new ideas to reduce the application burden on students?

Working Group Questions

1. In the previous working group session, what challenges did you identify to advancing equity-centered conversations or making strides toward improved equity?

2. Are there promising practices your institution has identified to address such challenges that could be used at other institutions?

3. What additional steps—whether unique or in common with others in your group—did you identify in the working group time that you can pursue at your institution?

CHALLENGES

Scalability:

To simplify applications in a manner that benefits all students, there must be a national effort/agreement to change the current state of applications.

Yield Rates:

If colleges were to stop collecting application fees, how would this affect yield rates, which for many colleges are functional and for a smaller number, cosmetic?

Uncertainty in Innovation:

As K-12 schools introduce new ways to assess students, how will institutions of differing types, with differing admission processes, adapt?

Platforms:

Can current admission (software) platforms accommodate new data formats for different evaluation criteria? What are the incentives for the software industry to develop adaptable technology?

Costs:

Admission offices are facing flat or reduced budgets, which often mean conforming to previously established patterns, including charging application fees to support office budgets. Will institutional leaders offer the resources needed to make substantive changes to the admission process?

OPPORTUNITIES

Institutional Flexibility:

Institutions can continue to streamline the application process, making it less of a burden for students. Can institutions that have simplified the process be identified to share best practices with other institutions?

Proactive Communication with Students:

Participants saw opportunities in communication to students, particularly in improved personalization and tailoring of communications to ensure that students are receiving messages from the admission office that convey their position with respect to the process. Included among this type of communication could also be pre-admission messages that alert students to their admissibility, either under direct admission or traditional admission.

Higher Education System Collaboration:

There is already a great deal of collaboration among system schools in states with higher education systems. That said, participants felt there was more to be done to help minimize the application burden on students, as well as a continuing desire of admission officers at system schools to work together to advance equity in the application process.

DEI Staff Review of Admission Application:

As mentioned above, participants cited multiple points of connectivity between admission offices and DEI offices at colleges and universities. Inviting the DEI staff to review the admission application and process was mentioned as a tangible activity that could provide valuable insights to the admission office.

Simplification:

Participants noted that simplifying the application presented an immediate opportunity. Reducing the number of questions on the application to only what is essential for making decisions constituted a starting point. Presentations from the Common Application, Coalition for College, and Concourse also illustrated ways that the application process is both currently changing and could continue to change in the future, including the possibility that the direction of action could be changed so that colleges apply to the student.

Eliminate the Application Fee:

Some participants, like the students in the 2022 NACAC-NASFAA report, suggested that colleges could eliminate application fees, as they constitute a barrier for low-income students. As noted above, application fees can be an integral part of an admission office's recruitment budget. At colleges where this is the case, a move to eliminate application fees can only be done with financial support from the institution to ensure that recruiting and student support funds are not further drained.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS COVERED

The Handoff Between Admission and Student Affairs

Participants emphasized the critical importance of ensuring smooth transitions among admission, enrollment, and student life at the institution. Indeed, the subject of this intermediate transition into postsecondary education was the subject of a recent study by Complete College America and the Reimagining College Access initiative.[5] What seems like a mundane process of moving from admitted student to enrolled student in reality contains gaps and barriers that can inhibit or even derail a student's path through college. Participants noted the following:

► The student handoff to both student affairs and faculty is a highly variable endeavor. In many cases, though, student information—both on paper and more figuratively—is lost as students move from the admission process to student affairs and advising. Such information loss can result in missed opportunities related to academic placement, student supports, and development opportunities to ensure student success.

► That said, participants noted that there was no "silver bullet" for retention challenges. As such, participants noted the desirability of future discussions involving institutional leaders, admission leaders, student affairs, and faculty.

Additional Faculty Discussions

Faculty figured prominently in discussions throughout the Elevate Equity convenings. In addition to the observations already included in the report, participants noted that:

► Institutional DEI policies often include different expectations for faculty and staff.

► Given the prominence of faculty in shaping admission policy and practice, hiring diverse faculty is a central component of improving equity in college admission and access.

► Similarly, performance evaluations and job descriptions should be periodically reviewed and revised to ensure that both reflect the institutional mission and goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Need-Based Financial Aid

While the Elevate Equity convening focused primarily on the admission process, participants frequently referred to the funding for need-based financial aid as being central to any institution's attempts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in admission and enrollment. At the top of the list of recommended future convenings was a convening between institutional leadership, admission leadership, and financial aid leadership. Included among the discussions about financial aid during the convening were:

► Examining the role of the CSS Profile in the college/financial aid process, particularly as it pertains to the complexity of the CSS Profile as a barrier to low-income students.

► The lack of sufficient state need-based financial aid as a barrier to equity.

► The lack of sufficient institutional budget allocations for need-based aid. Participants focused on the need to develop strategies to raise funding, through public or private sources, to ensure sufficient aid for underrepresented, low-income students to attend.

► The reality of need-sensitivity in admission, particularly that admission offices know they cannot meet the full need of many low-income students. Income ends up being a plus factor for privileged, higher-income students in some cases.

Financial aid issues are well-known and well-documented. While future work may not break new ground on the problems associated with the underfunding of higher education in the U.S., constructive work can be done to rebuild the case for public and private investments in higher education as a public good. Doing so will alleviate many of the challenges faced by admission offices, institutions, and students alike.

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[5] "Making the Connection: Using K12- Performance Assessments for College Placement and Advising," Complete College America, October 2022.
See: https://completecollege.org/resource/makingtheconnection/

CONCLUSION

The Elevate Equity convening affirmed two important points related to the 2022 NACAC-NASFAA report. First, it confirmed the report's focus on the need to dedicate time and space for institutional leadership to focus strategically on equity.

Comments from participants throughout the convening reiterated that they typically did not create such time and space on campus to focus strategically on the alignment between institutional equity goals and admission policy and practice.

Second, the convening demonstrated that when the time and space are set aside, senior admission officials, institutional leaders, and members of governing boards have a great deal to discuss about designing and implementing institutional strategies to improve equity in admission and enrollment.

In addition to offering the institutional teams in attendance at the symposium with the opportunity to develop concrete plans for their work, our hope is that through this report the convening provides both the institutions in attendance as well as the larger higher education community with tangible ideas to improve equity in admission and enrollment. This report also provides a rich source for future initiatives through NACAC and the higher education community overall. As such, NACAC will follow this report with recommendations designed to address the challenges and explore the opportunities outlined here.

NACAC

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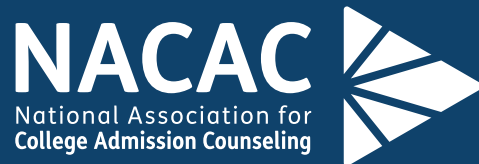
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