



Center For Innovation In College Admission

INNOVATION SUMMIT

The next evolution of college admission:
Learnings from NACAC's inaugural
Innovation Summit

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
SETTING THE STAGE FOR INNOVATION	3
PANEL 1: REAL CHANGE – HOW LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE	4
PANEL 2: THE HOTTEST SEAT ON CAMPUS – NAVIGATING THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS	6
INNOVATION STUDIOS: FROM POSSIBILITY TO PRACTICE, ROUND 1	7
EVALUATING INTERACTIVE TRANSCRIPTS	7
ALTERNATIVE ADMISSION ASSESSMENTS	8
DIRECT ADMISSION: A TALE OF TWO STATES	9
KEYNOTE SESSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? SHAPING THE FUTURE OF OPPORTUNITY	10
INNOVATION STUDIOS: FROM POSSIBILITIES TO PRACTICE, ROUND 2	12
ADMISSION SUCCESS COACHING	12
THE ROLE OF AI IN ADMISSION	13
ADVISING INNOVATION	13
DESIGN LAB ON CENTER PILLARS	15
PILLAR 1: REDESIGNING STRUCTURES AROUND THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS	15
PILLAR 2: ADVANCING ALTERNATIVES FOR ASSESSING MERIT AND COLLEGE READINESS	16
PILLAR 3: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF A HEALTHY AND DIVERSE ADMISSION WORKFORCE	17
CLOSING PLENARY: FROM VISION TO RESPONSIBILITY	18
NEXT STEPS FOR THE CENTER	19

NACAC

**INNOVATION
SUMMIT**

Center for Innovation in College Admission
National Association for College Admission Counseling

March 25-26 | Washington, DC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The inaugural Innovation Summit, hosted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling in Spring 2026, marked a pivotal moment for college admission.

As the field navigates a national crisis in confidence in higher education, the Summit convened leaders and practitioners to co-design solutions for a more equitable and student-centered future. Central to this effort was the public launch of NACAC's Center for Innovation in College Admission, which focuses on three strategic pillars: redesigning application structures, advancing alternative merit assessments, and supporting a healthy, diverse workforce.

Throughout the convening, participants explored emerging practices such as direct admission models, competency-based transcripts, and the ethical integration of AI to alleviate administrative burdens. Key insights from higher education leaders emphasized moving from a legacy of managing challenges to

a future of solving them by fostering “talent-first” approaches that value resilience and curiosity over traditional metrics like GPA and seat time.

Despite institutional inertia and resource constraints, the Summit revealed a strong collective drive to dismantle systemic barriers. Moving forward, the Center will prioritize convening a broader group of stakeholders (including policymakers and students), standardizing systems to reduce student burden, and preparing the next generation of admission professionals through mentorship and supportive training. By aligning admission practices with the “higher calling” of equity and access, the field is poised to ensure every student can navigate postsecondary transitions with clarity and support.

“Is the college admission process consistently serving students the way that it should?”

— Angel Pérez, Chief Executive Officer of NACAC



INTRODUCTION

Research shows that national perception of the value and role of higher education have shifted significantly over the last several decades.¹

At the same time, studies demonstrate that recent college graduates are confident that their degrees provide value in today’s competitive job market.² Gaps like these are troubling as higher education evolves to respond to shifting demographics, growing income inequality, and technological disruptions. Amid this crisis of confidence, one thing is clear—to ensure that all students have access to resources to make informed decisions about their futures, fundamental evolution of college admission practices are necessary.

As the field stands at this critical juncture, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) convened a group of national leaders, researchers, and practitioners to participate in its first annual Innovation Summit.



These attendees were brought together not to admire the problem, but to co-design its solutions. As NACAC CEO Angel Pérez argued, this fundamental evolution is “no longer optional, but way overdue,” signaling the field’s collective shift from a legacy of managing challenges

to a future of solving them. This gathering also marked the public launch of NACAC’s [Center for Innovation in College Admission](#)—a hub for developing innovative solutions to the most pressing problems in higher education admission.

The Innovation Summit’s narrative was structured around exploration of emerging practices and challenges aligned to the Center’s three strategic pillars and core questions that the field is grappling with:

Pillar #1: Redesigning structures around the college application process	<i>If we designed the college application and financial aid process entirely around the student rather than the institution, what structural hurdles would we eliminate?</i>
Pillar #2: Advancing alternatives for assessing merit and college readiness	<i>If we look beyond traditional measures such as test scores and GPAs, what are the most critical contextual factors or competencies we should measure to truly understand a student’s potential?</i>
Pillar #3: Shaping the future of a healthy and diverse admission workforce	<i>If we reimagined the daily life of an admission professional, what structural support and/or training would be required to ensure they are equipped to support the complex needs of today’s students?</i>

By design, NACAC and the Center seek to bridge practices across K-12, higher education, workforce, and community-based organizations to drive more seamless experiences for students and families navigating postsecondary transitions. Each sector brings strong evidence about what works—and where systemic barriers have created persistent challenges. Throughout the day, facilitators from [Education First](#) led participants in generative exercises to capture insights and tensions to begin sketching out a collective vision, illustrating how the field is ready to move from a **legacy of managing challenges** to a **future of solving them**.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695003/perceived-importance-college-hits-new-low.aspx>

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/702284/college-students-grads-strong-career-value-degree.aspx>

SETTING THE STAGE FOR INNOVATION



The Summit kicked off with remarks from NACAC CEO **Angel Pérez**, who argued that change is “no longer optional, but way overdue.” Angel asked participants to be radically honest—sharing their candid reflections about emerging innovations to ensure they will work in practice—calling on leaders and partners in the field to reflect on whether they were content with maintaining the status quo, managing the same decades-old challenges, or ready to solve them.



An anchor funder of the Center, **Peter Ross**, Managing Director, Youth Thriving Through Learning Fund at the Stuart Foundation, grounded his remarks in a significant precedent that drives higher ed admission—the content mastery standards set in 1892 by the National Education Association’s Committee of Ten.³ Peter asked participants to challenge outdated practices, which measure a student’s readiness by how long they were in a class, and instead consider broader indicators of whether a student truly learned and is thriving. He framed the Summit as an opportunity to flip this script, using college admission innovation to reshape high school programs, rather than the other way around.



³ <https://www.nea.org/about-nea/mission-vision-values/history-nea>

PANEL #1: REAL CHANGE – HOW LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The first panel of the day brought together a diverse set of perspectives from all angles of college admission: **Jenny Rickard**, CEO of the Common App; **Diego Arambula** of the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching and Learning and the California State University Board of Trustees; and **Marc C. Conner**, President of Skidmore College.

“We should not make changes at the speed of light, but not at the speed of lava either. How do we move with more urgency, bringing lots of folks together?”

— **Diego Arambula**, VP of Educational Transformation at the Carnegie Foundation & Vice Chair, California State University Board of Trustees

The session explored how these three leaders strategically advocated for bold new approaches to support students “to and through” their college transitions. Each leader focused on a different level of reform—national platform shifts, higher education system innovations, research, and institutional-level commitments—while reflecting on the challenges of communicating and building buy-in around a new vision.

The Pilot-to-Scale Blueprint

Jenny Rickard shared the origin story of the Common App, which began 50 years ago with just 15 colleges to reduce friction for students seeking to gain college opportunity. Although the original Common App streamlined cumbersome variation in physical, hard-copy admission submissions, the same learning applies to any modern innovations. She emphasized that innovation

requires “purpose, people/partnership, and piloting.” This “pilot” mentality remains essential. This ethos allowed the Common App to go digital in 1998—and currently supports their efforts to scale direct admission pilots to 800,000 low- and middle-income students.⁴

Dismantling Chronic Barriers

Diego Arambula spoke about the “Carnegie Unit” (1906), the predominant high school instruction standard that equates to 120 hours of classroom instruction, as a primary structural barrier. He described initiatives led by his foundation to address how “seat time,” the amount of instructional time a student spends in the classroom, has limited admission officers from seeing students’ true potential. He advocates for alternative measures such as the development of new learning progressions around critical thinking, communication, and creativity

⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/15/08/2025/ceo-reflects-common-app-marks-50-years>



that respond to postsecondary and employer demands for these essential, future-ready skills. Furthermore, he mentioned the Foundation’s classification work, which now includes metrics for student access and earning potential, prompting institutions to assess their commitment to serving their communities and supporting students’ long-term economic success.

Addressing Costs to Increase Access

Marc C. Connor addressed the immense challenge of college affordability, stating that student cost cannot be overcome by cuts to postsecondary budgets alone without altering the institution’s mission. He identified need-based financial aid and scholarships as crucial solutions, making access and equity a top priority for institutional fundraising and strategic discussions. The necessity of uniting the entire campus was also stressed—ensuring every project, from faculty to the cabinet, directly supports the effort to bring in students who will thrive.

As the session closed, panelists were asked to reflect on how they enable innovation and address persistent barriers.

Their recommendations included:

- ▶ **Infusing innovation with joy:** When the Common App turned its submission button into a moment of celebration for the students and their families, their digital application process was infused with joy as both the platform and prospective colleges acknowledged and affirmed students’ potential at a pivotal milestone.
- ▶ **A need for “punctuated equilibrium”:** Borrowing the concept from evolutionary science, Diego Arumbula named that leaders must recognize a massive burst of change is sometimes necessary to ensure that college admission evolves and keeps pace with shifting societal factors and pressures.
- ▶ **Higher ed must reflect critically on ROI:** Institutions have not fully reckoned with public perception of the value of degrees. To deliver the return on investment demanded by students and families, higher education leaders must commit not only to address costs and future earnings, but to ensure that students are prepared for careers and lives of thriving and consequence.

PANEL #2: THE HOTTEST SEAT ON CAMPUS – NAVIGATING THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS

The second panel was moderated by **Rick Clark**, Vice Provost of Enrollment Management at Georgia Institute of Technology, and featured **Kasey Urquidez**, Senior Director of Higher Education, ACT, former Vice President for Enrollment Management at the University of Arizona and NACAC Board Trustee; **Johnnie Johnson**, Vice President for Enrollment Management at Washington College and NACAC Board Trustee; and **Whitney Soule**, Vice Provost and Dean of Admissions at University of Pennsylvania.

Together, these admission leaders shared their reflections from “the hottest seat on campus” and how they navigate competing agendas, institutional priorities, increased scrutiny and public perception.

Key Leadership Insights:

- ▶ **Data-Driven Casemaking:** Johnnie Johnson characterized enrollment leaders as “lobbyists across campus,” needing to deliver budgets while advocating for families despite negative narratives that have broken public trust in higher education. Data has been key in these conversations—to build transparency and tell a compelling story to campus leaders.
- ▶ **Building Buy-in on Campus:** A key theme of the conversation was the importance of building trust—both internally to forge strategic relationships with key campus partners, like faculty members, as well as externally to rebuild public trust that has been broken. Whitney Soule reflected on her “intra-campus” roadshow, visiting peers across departments and academic units, demonstrating how holistic admission values apply to their specific disciplines.
- ▶ **Mental Health of the Workforce:** The role has become so complex that many admission professionals are asking themselves, “Do I really want to do this?” Panelists stressed that leaders must model self-care and offset the grueling nature of the admission cycle with flex schedules and other benefits to recognize staff contributions. The next generation of admission leaders must be developed through intentional onboarding, support, and mentorship.



“Recognizing there is a crisis in the sector... We know that a ship at harbor is safe—but that’s not what a ship is created for.”

— Rick Clark, Georgia Institute of Technology

INNOVATION STUDIOS: FROM POSSIBILITY TO PRACTICE (ROUND 1)

Next, attendees opted into three small group breakout discussions. Each small group included featured speakers who reflected on their leadership of emerging approaches that innovate some aspect of college admission—interactive transcripts, alternative admission assessments, and direct admission policies.



To support attendees pressure testing these ideas and reflecting on what could be applied in their own contexts, facilitators from Education First led some design thinking exercises. The following section includes a synthesis of the featured speakers' promising practices as well as attendee feedback and reflections.

Breakout: Evaluating Interactive Transcripts

Featured speakers—**Andrea Purcell**, Program Director, International Big Picture Learning Credential and **Cheryl Jones Walker**, Director for the Center for School and System Redesign at the Learning Policy Institute—presented two innovative approaches to modernize the high school transcript to reflect broader evidence of student learning, competencies, and skills development.

- ▶ The **International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC)** is a competency-based alternative to traditional grading that uses a digital learner profile to showcase a student's individual strengths and real-world achievements. Developed with the University of Melbourne, it provides a research-backed assessment of core learning goals to offer students a direct, rigorous pathway into higher education or the workforce.
- ▶ The **Learning Policy Institute's partnership with Territorium** utilizes a digital Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR) to enable students to capture and verify diverse competencies—such as critical thinking and collaboration—through an AI-powered platform, creating a more holistic and equitable representation of student achievement beyond traditional transcripts.

INNOVATION STUDIOS (ROUND 1)

Summit attendees reflected on the drivers and barriers of innovations like alternative transcripts. Some key takeaways from the full group discussion included:

- ▶ **A persistent “chicken-and-egg” barrier to alternative transcript adoption exists:** High schools are often hesitant to implement new transcripts without a clear commitment from postsecondary institutions to review them, while overburdened admission officers may feel uncomfortable deviating from traditional, easily comparable transcripts. To overcome this, substantial training is required for both K-12 counselors and higher education staff to shift the administrative weight away from the secondary level.
- ▶ **Despite implementation hurdles, attendees recognized the transformative potential of alternative transcripts.** Some benefits recognized included: allowing neurodivergent or differently-abled students to showcase specific talents that traditional grades often obscure, providing a more holistic view of readiness for all students, and more effectively positioning college admission as a relevant next step for high school graduates to continue to developing durable and technical skills needed to enter the workforce.
- ▶ **There is interest in partnering with organizations and piloting these alternative transcripts at secondary and postsecondary levels.** Participants suggested that partnering with high-profile organizations like Common App or Scholarship Universe would signal to both secondary and postsecondary institutions the value of interactive transcript platforms.

Breakout: Alternative Admission Assessments

Featured speakers—**Will Patch**, College Partnerships Manager for Schoolhouse.world and **Terry Crawford**, CEO of InitialView—shared an overview of innovative ways to assess student competencies such as critical thinking and peer dialogue skills.

- ▶ **Schoolhouse Tutoring Dialogues** matches students with peers with differing opinions to engage in a dialogue around a specific topic—such as religious identity, climate change, or the impacts of AI—and then reflect on the experience and their own capacity for empathy and peer learning. Over 55 postsecondary partners are implementing these dialogues in their admission process currently.



INNOVATION STUDIOS (ROUND 1)

- ▶ **InitialView** created an AI-enabled platform called VIVA, which allows students to submit their research projects and record video responses to customized questions providing more context about their work. The tool could be used to authentically engage students and learn more about artifacts and portfolios.

Attendees reflected on the barriers and drivers for alternative admission assessments, such as those offered by Schoolhouse.world and InitialView. Some key takeaways from the full group discussion included:

- ▶ Concerns surfaced about **unconscious bias in video-based platforms** that could disadvantage students based on race, gender, disability, or language skills. Furthermore, there is a strong concern that these **tools might become “additional hoops”** in an already cumbersome process, potentially favoring privileged students who have access to extra coaching.
- ▶ **Broader implementation may be driven by specific applications of these tools**, such as using video interviews to waive English proficiency exams or granting credit for prior learning through verified peer interactions. **Piloting and evaluating the impact of these types of tech-enabled assessments** on specific student subgroups could build the case to drive broader adoption.

Breakout: Direct Admission: A Tale of Two States

Featured speakers—**April Grommo**, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Strategic Enrollment Management at California State University, and **Steven Gentile**, Executive Director at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission—shared an overview of direct admission program implementation in their states.

- ▶ **California State University (CSU)** represents the largest four-year university system in the country, enrolling 416,000 undergraduate students and receiving over 900,000 applications each year. Legislation (California SB 640) led to a direct admission pilot that will scale across the state system by Fall 2027 to use student data to identify qualified applicants (on track to complete A-G coursework with passing grades) and automatically notify them of their guaranteed admission to CSU.

- ▶ **Tennessee** launched its direct admission pilot in 2025 with a random selection of 230+ high schools and more than 50 participating higher education institutions. In December 2025, approximately 41,000 eligible high school seniors received offer letters, with a selection receiving financial aid offers in the same package.

Attendees in this breakout recognized that direct admission programs offer a streamlined pathway to higher education, but their success is often hampered by complex technical and communicative barriers. Some key takeaways from the full group discussion included:

- ▶ **Significant infrastructure challenges remain**, ranging from outdated data systems to physical mail “bouncebacks” and the administrative difficulty of syncing admission offers with financial aid packages. A critical communication gap also persists: school counselors are frequently left out of the loop when students receive offers, leading to missed opportunities for guided support.
- ▶ There was **curiosity about the application of direct admission practices to re-engage students who dropped out and returning adult learners**, but there are administrative challenges to identify and recruit them. Some states are exploring this in response to rapid shifts in workforce driven by AI and automation that will require communities to upskill.
- ▶ **Programs like the CSU initiative have found success** by standardizing award letters to eliminate “sticker shock” for low-income families through clear, early reporting of the real costs of enrolling. In addition, presenters recommend complementing this transparency with authentic community engagement, such as campus discovery days and partnerships with community-based organizations, is essential for building the trust necessary to convert direct offers into actual enrollments.

KEYNOTE SESSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? SHAPING THE FUTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

After learning about some emerging practices and innovations in the field, attendees continued to reflect over lunch while NACAC CEO Angel Pérez led a candid fireside chat with **Dan Porterfield**, President and CEO, The Aspen Institute, who in recently transitioned to CEO of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

The conversation touched on critical opportunities to rethink the role that higher education plays in preparing the next generation of leaders in the field.

Moving to a “Talent-First” Approach in Higher Education

To move beyond the traditional metrics used in higher education to describe the characteristics of class cohorts—e.g., GPA, standardized test scores and demographics—institutions could consider a broader set of competencies and skills as evidence of student merit

and readiness. Dan Porterfield argued that qualities often overrepresented in first-generation and low-income students—such as curiosity, resilience, and a “history of raising their hands” for opportunity—should be recognized as the primary skills needed for a modern democracy. This shift toward evidence of students’ talents can allow institutions to view equity not as a demographic quota, but as a search for high-potential individuals. Angel Pérez reinforced this by framing the postsecondary institutional role as accepting those who are “ready, willing, and able” and providing the environment for them to “become the best and the brightest.”



KEYNOTE SESSION

Debunking Elitist Narratives with Community and Workforce Partnerships

To rebuild public trust in the power and impact of higher education, both speakers spoke about the importance of stepping out of ivory towers and into the local community. Partnerships between colleges and universities, community-based organizations, and workforce development is critical—forming what Dan Porterfield referred to as a “triangle of success.” Together, these sectors can deliver more return on investment for degree holders, ensuring that communities are developing their future leaders and strengthening local economies.

Cultivating and Supporting the Admission Workforce

Dan Porterfield called for mentorship of the next generation of admission leaders, encouraging leaders to support one another by bearing the risks and burdens of their colleagues. In his closing remarks, he re-grounded attendees’ attention to the “higher calling” and values of the sector—to connect every student to opportunities that develop their talents and skills. By aligning their work to core values, leaders can navigate the hard days of administration without losing sight of the transformative power of the college experience.

“We have a higher calling in this room —to make sure every single student can pursue education because of who they are as a human being. Other parts of a university can forget that calling; we have to remind them.”

— Dan Porterfield, President and CEO, The Aspen Institute



INNOVATION STUDIOS: FROM POSSIBILITY TO PRACTICE (ROUND 2)

After lunch, attendees opted into another round of three small group breakout discussions that focused on seismic shifts to the admission profession—admissions success coaching, AI portfolio review, and advising innovation.

Education First supported attendees and encouraged ideas and reflection through design thinking exercises. The following sections include a synthesis of featured speakers' promising practices as well as attendee feedback and reflections.

Breakout: Admission Success Coaching

Featured speakers—**Robert Gould**, Vice President for Strategic Enrollment Management at Augsburg University, and **Jim Disrude**, Executive Director at DC Education Group—discussed a research initiative designed to transition college admissions from a transactional process into a relationship-driven coaching model. The [Admission Success Coaching pilot](#) is being conducted in partnership

with NACAC's Center for Innovation in College Admission and builds on direct admission models to ensure that academic belonging work begins long before a student steps foot on campus for orientation.

After learning about the pilot, attendees reflected on how the admission field must shift to enable innovations like these. Some themes included:

- ▶ **Integrating student service functions:** Enrollment management and admission must stop acting as siloed entities on campus and begin to view their work in alignment with efforts led by Offices of Student Life and Student Success. This creates a more seamless continuum of support, rather than handing a student off after acceptances are received.



INNOVATION STUDIOS (ROUND 2)

- ▶ **Reimagining the day-to-day work:** As direct admission becomes the norm, the timeline and tasks of a counselor must be reimagined. Instead of processing paperwork, staff should be supporting students in their individualized journeys. Research shows that this shift connects more directly with core employee motivations to champion and support student success and may be helpful in increasing staff retention.
- ▶ **Shifting from recruitment to ongoing support:** Attendees noted that college admission recruitment is diverging into two groups: schools that students pursue and schools that must pursue students. To survive in the latter group, counselors must evolve to be seen as more than the gatekeepers into higher education, and rather as coaches who support students through their postsecondary transitions.

Breakout: The Role of AI in Admission

Featured speakers—**Melanie Gottlieb**, Executive Director at American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and **Sarah McInnis**, General Manager at Slate.org—discussed the role of AI in admission, particularly how emerging tech can streamline processes and provide more nuanced filters to support counselors in an increasingly complex higher education landscape. The discussion positioned AI as a “pattern engine, not a truth engine.” AI should be treated as a tool for drafting, predictive modeling, and data synthesis. It is not a replacement for human judgment or a definitive source of truth.

Some key points from the discussion included:

- ▶ **Alleviating administrative burden to put students first.** By removing the “brick wall” of paperwork, staff should be freed up for high-value student interactions.
- ▶ **New tools to sift through new skills-based data.** Admission offices are seeing a rise in alternative skills-based transcripts. AI is becoming essential to sort and synthesize these materials.

- ▶ **Celebrating bright spots and tactical wins.** Attendees shared AI applications in their day-to-day work to lift up examples of ethical and equitable uses of the technology. These included: using an AI-enabled platform for a national phone call campaign and lead generation; turning to generative AI for first drafts of enrollment plans and syllabi; and piloting “dual-reader” systems where AI evaluates writing style and grammar to supplement a human readers’ assessment.

As new tools and technologies proliferate, the admission profession must keep pace, though few institutions are actively discussing how to integrate AI into their data systems and platforms currently. Discussion of some of the “pain points” and challenges surfaced key themes:

- ▶ **Misinformation driven by AI:** Generative search often pulls incorrect institutional data. Admission offices now face the task of “correcting the record” in a world where AI-driven search is the primary way students get information about schools.
- ▶ **Flagging fraudulent applications:** A major concern raised was the increase in fraudulent applications, transcripts, and IDs enabled by AI. The solution? Using a “robot to fight a robot” method to detect AI-generated fraud.

Breakout: Advising Innovation

Featured speakers—**Dustin Liu**, Senior Associate Director at New York University’s Stern Initiative on Purpose and Flourishing, **David Quinn**, Director of International Baccalaureate Programs at Harlem Village Academies, and **Jennifer Nuechterlein**, College & Career Counselor at Hunterdon Central Regional High School—discussed a philosophical shift in advising, moving away from “box-checking” and toward a more holistic approach that supports young people in envisioning their futures. This session also highlighted the [Designing Your Life \(DYL\) Fellowship](#)—an initiative of NACAC’s Center for Innovation in College Admission supported by Strada Education Foundation that trains counselors using Stanford University researchers’ life-design curriculum.

INNOVATION STUDIOS (ROUND 2)

Key themes from the discussion, included some key shifts for the profession:

- ▶ **Advising as a long-term commitment:** The consensus was that advising should not end at college admission; it ends at college graduation. Success is measured by persistence and completion, not just the initial win of an acceptance letter.
- ▶ **Identity formation under uncertainty:** Rather than seeing a career as a fixed list or destination, students should be encouraged to view it as a hypothesis. This helps them navigate the discomfort of the unknown and see themselves as designers of their own next chapters.
- ▶ **The value of “productive struggle”:** Advisors are focusing on helping students build the resilience needed to sit in discomfort and persist through the inevitable blips of the transition to postsecondary life. While students want instant gratification, the advisor’s goal is to ensure they understand that this is a significant life design moment, not just a transaction.

Attendees in the session reflected on additional shifts needed, identifying some key opportunities:

- ▶ **Connecting advising and learning:** Attendees also emphasized that for this to work, advising cannot happen solely in the counseling office. Fostering buy-in among school and campus leaders around a shared responsibility will enable counselors to share insights with educators and faculty to ensure that student support is coherent.
- ▶ **Engaging families in the advising process:** There is a need to reimagine parent and family engagement. Instead of just giving them a checklist of deadlines, schools should invite them into the process to understand the specific durable and technical skills their students are developing.
- ▶ **Balanced consideration of “ROI” and career pathways:** Although there is a positive trend toward promoting multiple pathways, the audience warned against tracking students into low-skill, low-wage jobs. With students grappling with the rising costs of postsecondary education, they must be given a clear view of short- and long-term earnings to make informed decisions that can support lifelong economic mobility and thriving.



DESIGN LABS ON CENTER PILLARS

In the afternoon, participants came back together for a “Design Lab” facilitated by Education First to re-ground reflection in the Center for Innovation in College Admission’s three pillars and engage all attendees in sketching out the roadmap to innovate college admission practices.

<p>Pillar #1: Redesigning structures around the college application process</p>	<p><i>If we designed the college application and financial aid process entirely around the student rather than the institution, what structural hurdles would we eliminate?</i></p>
<p>Pillar #2: Advancing alternatives for assessing merit and college readiness</p>	<p><i>If we look beyond traditional measures such as test scores and GPAs, what are the most critical contextual factors or competencies we should measure to truly understand a student's potential?</i></p>
<p>Pillar #3: Shaping the future of a healthy and diverse admission workforce</p>	<p><i>If we reimaged the daily life of an admission professional, what structural support or training would be required to ensure they are equipped to support the complex needs of today's students?</i></p>

Participants huddled in small groups to reflect on one of the three pillars of the Center, considering strong emerging practices, unmet needs, and barriers to innovation in college admission. The next section synthesizes their reflections.

Pillar #1: Redesigning structures around the college application process

Emerging Practices and Promising Work

As direct admission approaches proliferate across more states, this model has tremendous potential to increase equitable access to higher education. Summit attendees celebrated how direct admission has been successful in reducing student anxiety and expanding proactive outreach, particularly when integrated with financial aid information. This work is supported by a widespread commitment from admission practitioners who are increasingly willing to pivot toward student success and



DESIGN LABS

a talent-focused lens. These practices reflect a broader reframing of the admission system, characterized by a collaborative spirit and a focus on exploration.

Unmet Needs and Opportunities

Several key opportunities exist to refine the admission process, most notably through the ethical and efficient integration of AI and technology, provided there is adequate staff and clear guidance for its use. There is a profound need for greater transparency and simplification, including identifying ways to reduce student fees and creating consistent deadlines and expectations across different institutions. Rigorous research is also required to better understand enrollment patterns tied to direct admission and to foster deeper connections between researchers and practitioners. Additionally, there is an unmet need for targeted guidance for specific populations—including undocumented, international, and non-traditional students—and for more intentional engagement across various institutional departments and stakeholders.

Challenges and Barriers

The most significant barrier to progress is institutional inertia, where the status quo and institutional needs—such as revenue streams and quotas—are prioritized over a student-centered approach. This issue is compounded by a systemic complexity, often described as a “wicked problem,” involving confusing jargon and inconsistent rules that make the process illegible for many families. Resource and personnel constraints, including a lack of funding, staff time, and counselor overload, further hinder the ability to provide adequate college access training. Finally, deep-seated equity hurdles remain, such as the constraints of the Carnegie

Unit system and technology gaps in rural and inner-city schools, while the untimely delivery of financial aid information remains a critical “pain point” for students seeking clear admission decisions.

Pillar #2: Advancing alternatives for assessing merit and college readiness

Emerging Practices and Promising Work

Current strengths in the field are anchored by established models of skills-based admission—long used in the visual/performing arts and athletics—as well as the adoption of portfolios and holistic profiles. There is a growing focus on authentic student work and a widespread “test-optional” environment that allows for flexibility in grading scales. These shifts are supported by a genuine, field-wide desire to move away from traditional application constraints toward a more student-centered process. Additionally, streamlining technology tools continue to play a vital role in reducing the administrative burden on students while institutions experiment with alternative assessment methods.

Unmet Needs and Opportunities

A primary area for growth lies in the translation of student competencies. K-12 systems must be able to efficiently process and supply evidence of student learning (e.g., student portfolios or alternative transcripts) and communicate it at scale to admission staff. Higher education admission offices also need guidance on how to interpret and understand the information on these alternative transcripts. To ensure these shifts are sustainable, the field must develop equity safeguards to prevent alternative assessments from becoming a barrier for historically underrepresented students. Furthermore,

The most significant barrier to progress is institutional inertia, where the status quo and institutional needs—such as revenue streams and quotas—are prioritized over a student-centered approach.

DESIGN LABS

there is a significant opportunity to redefine student success by valuing resilience and growth potential, supported by longitudinal studies that link specific competencies to retention. Realizing this potential will require comprehensive staff training and may require rethinking of high school graduation requirements to recognize skills developed both in and outside of the classroom environment.

Challenges and Barriers

The transition to these new models is hindered by longstanding reliance on standardized testing and a policy mismatch between K-12 innovation and postsecondary requirements. The dominance of the Carnegie Unit system, and a cultural obsession with selectivity and rankings often lead institutions to prioritize “Big Data” over character or grit. Resource constraints also present a major hurdle, as underpaid and overworked admission staff struggle with the speed of application review and the high cost of alternative assessments, which carries a risk of “pay-to-game” inequities. Furthermore, external pressures—such as NCAA core GPA requirements and the potential for AI to undermine the authenticity of student work—create significant friction for those attempting to implement equitable non-quantitative measures of merit.

Pillar #3: Shaping the future of a healthy and diverse admission workforce

Emerging Practices and Promising Work

Summit attendees celebrated the strong foundation of admission’s professional community and emphasis on collaboration, evidenced by increased partnerships between community-based organizations (CBOs) and national leadership groups like NACAC, National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), and American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). Existing strengths include a surge of high-quality talent and young energy in admission offices, where leaders are successfully modeling self-care and leveraging hybrid work flexibility. The profession is also increasingly open to exploring AI and technology to streamline daily tasks, creating space for more efficient operations.

Unmet Needs and Opportunities

There is an opportunity to modernize the profession by creating structured career ladders to clearly connect entry-level counseling roles to long-term advancement. A central unmet need is the development of a “human-centered” work model, where AI is used specifically in a supporting role or to free up time for authentic engagement across the entire student life cycle. Key growth areas include finding ways to measure non-salary benefits, helping staff feel more certain in an unpredictable market, and providing more education about the industry as a whole. Proposed solutions include establishing a resource hub or consortium to pool information and building out dedicated onboarding programs for professionals in their first three years to ensure long-term retention and executive-level preparation.

Challenges and Barriers

The primary challenges inhibiting the field are role compensation and budgetary constraints, where salaries frequently do not reflect the true value of the staff and funding for professional development is increasingly scarce. The current workload is often described as an exhausting “grind,” driven by high expectations for travel and status-quo job descriptions that demand more productivity with fewer resources. Structural barriers in advancement are particularly prevalent in public systems, where individual contributors are often forced into management roles to receive a promotion, leading many to opt out of the profession entirely. These issues are exacerbated by generational differences in expectations regarding authority and performance, as well as the intense pressure placed on campus leaders who occupy what is described as the “hottest seat on campus.”

CLOSING PLENARY: FROM VISION TO RESPONSIBILITY

To close this inaugural Innovation Summit, *New York Times* journalist **Jacques Steinberg** engaged a panel of experts who had been embedded in the day's conversations as listeners and fellow learners.

The panel featured **Anthony Abraham Jack**, Faculty Director of the Newbury Center and Associate Professor of Higher Education Leadership at Boston University, **Ken Redd**, Senior Director, Research and Policy Analysis for the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), and **Joy St. John**, a college admission professional. At this critical juncture for higher education, the panel was asked to reflect on their key takeaways and paths forward to modernize admission without losing sight of commitments to equitable practices.

Some highlights from the discussion included:

- ▶ There is an opportunity to be more intentional in cultivating the next generation of admission leaders. Utilizing internships and mentorship programs can expose students to admission as a viable, values-aligned career path.

- ▶ Leaders were challenged to break down internal silos by forming partnerships between Chief Enrollment Officers and Chief Business Officers, ensuring that equity goals are translated into the “dollars and cents” language of institutional finance.
- ▶ By convening a range of institutional stakeholders—from donors to faculty—and aligning their disparate motivations with the mission of access, the field can empower its **“joyful problem solvers”** to dismantle misinformation and ensure every student has a pathway to become who they hope to be.

“Joyful problem solvers always win... eventually.”



NEXT STEPS FOR THE CENTER OF INNOVATION IN COLLEGE ADMISSION

This inaugural event marked a critical milestone for the Center for Innovation in College Admission—publicly launching the Center and convening leaders with a broad set of expertise across K-12, higher education, research, and educational technology.

This first Summit focused on raising visibility around some of the emerging practices that seek to address challenges that the college admission field is navigating and providing space for the admission community to ask tough questions of each other to ensure that the field moves forward ethically and equitably. In the afternoon Design Lab, attendees were asked to reflect on the unique role that the Center can play in advancing innovation—a few key themes emerged:



Convening a broader group of stakeholders.

This first Summit gave many attendees hope and inspiration that they needed to continue to boldly lead in college admission. Attendees encouraged NACAC to continue to leverage its Center as a big tent for critical conversation. To build on the momentum of this first Summit, the Center should intentionally engage some key groups that were absent at the convening, including: state and federal policymakers, workforce and industry partners, families, and students.



Spotlighting research and emerging practices.

The Summit breakout sessions teased only some of the work in the field led by specific institutions, research organizations, and educational technology companies. Attendees are eager to learn more and continue exploring practices in these areas and they want accessible resources to share learnings with other partners not present at the Summit. Suggestions included webinars, research briefings, or even creating a podcast to shine a spotlight on these innovative practices.



Preparing the next generation of innovative admission leaders.

Attendees at the Summit recognized the critical need to prepare the admission workforce to not only manage active admission cycles, but to play an active role in piloting and leading innovative practices. To support this work, the Center can play a critical role in cultivating professional development and leadership skills needed to drive this work through the development of mentorship or Institute models and embedding learnings from the Center into NACAC's annual conferences.

Continues.

NEXT STEPS



Standardizing admission systems and aligning timelines.

Attendees named that the current misalignment of application and decision deadlines creates a heavy navigational burden for students, families, and counselors. Streamlining these institutional processes is a prerequisite for innovation, as the administrative complexity of existing systems leaves little room for new approaches. Aligning these timelines and standardizing requirements would free up critical capacity, allowing stakeholders to focus on student support rather than bureaucratic hurdles.

In response to these themes, and to build on the momentum of this first Summit, the Center will expand opportunities for engagement throughout the year. These efforts will include a range of formats, from small, curated convenings and “design sprints” focused on specific topics, to larger-scale, in-person and virtual offerings. Across these engagements, the Center will intentionally bring together stakeholders from school counseling, college admission, enrollment management, technology, research, and policy to support cross-sector collaboration and shared problem-solving. Efforts such as pre-conference convenings and conference workshops will serve as important entry points for deeper engagement from front-line practitioners, ensuring that learning continues beyond a single moment and contributes to ongoing innovation in the field.

Across these engagements, the Center will intentionally bring together stakeholders from school counseling, college admission, enrollment management, technology, research, and policy to support cross-sector collaboration and shared problem-solving.

About NACAC

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), founded in 1937, is a membership organization with more than 28,000 members worldwide who are dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education. NACAC's mission is to empower college admission counseling professionals through education, advocacy, and community.

About the Center for Innovation in College Admission

The Center's mission is to shape the future of college admission through innovation, equity, and collaboration. The Center seeks to pioneer transformative research, design imaginative programs, and convene field leaders to ensure that admission policy and practice keep pace with a rapidly changing educational environment—all in support of students and their pursuit of higher education.

About Education First

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with deep expertise in education improvement. We deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions, and results so all

Students are prepared for success in college, career, and life. Support for NACAC's Center for Innovation in College Admission is provided by **Roneeta Guha**, **Ann Duffy**, and **Sarina Sheth Noone**. More information about Education First's work, including other research and resources on strengthening and scaling pathways, is available at www.education-first.com.

Stay connected

Follow NACAC and the Center for Innovation in College Admission to stay in the loop as this work evolves.

<https://www.nacacnet.org/>

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