



Ad Hoc Committee on Mental Health and Equity in the Transition to Postsecondary Education



Purpose

Building upon the work of the Current Trends and Future Issues (CTFI) Committee, this committee will re-examine the CTFI committee's 2019-20 recommendations for assisting students and professionals with mental health challenges related to the college transition and offer its perspective on how those recommendations could be revised or supplemented due to the pandemic. The ad hoc committee will be asked to identify systemic challenges faced by college admission counseling professionals and students and recommend ways in which NACAC is best positioned to address these challenges in a post-COVID landscape.



Committee Members

The committee was comprised of public high school counselors, postsecondary admissions professionals, and representatives from community-based organizations.

Co-Chairs

- **Sean Ohira**, Mid-Pacific Institute (HI)
- **Yvonne Espinoza**, Yvonne Espinoza College Counseling Services (TX)
- **Joanne Baker**, New Haven School-Saratoga Springs Campus (UT)
- **Lisa Ball**, International School of Dakar
- **Sara Cohen**, University of Pennsylvania (PA)
- **Karen Dickerson**, Cuyahoga Community College (OH)
- **Nicolas Dillman**, George School (PA)
- **Noor Haddad**, The Bishop's School (CA)
- **Allie Kerns**, Trinity High School (KY)
- **Shanell Leggins**, The Archer School for Girls (CA)
- **Sandria Mason**, University of Pittsburgh (PA)
- **Allan Mathew**, Tufts University (MA)
- **Savannah Miller**, Johns Hopkins University (MD)
- **Virginia Miller**, Miller School Solutions, LLC (VA)
- **Jeffrey Neill**, Graded – The American School in Sao Paulo (Brazil)
- **Aminah Praileau**, Wellesley College (MA)
- **Chris Rodriguez**, The Lovett School (GA)
- **Katie Schumacher**, Mt. Mary University (WI)
- **Janine Silberberg**, John P. Stevens High School (NJ)
- **Linh Snyder**, Malibu High School (CA)
- **Sunny Park Suh**, Hunter College High School (NY)
- **Sean Whitten**, John Paul II High School (TX)

NACAC Staff Liaisons

- **Melissa Clinedinst**, Director of Research
- **Murphy Miller**, Associate Director, Membership Experience



Recommendation

- Create more consistency in college applications by advising application platforms and institutions on how to provide a more uniform application process for students.

Committee members identified the lack of consistency in applications and the process, overall, to be a great source of confusion and stress for students. The committee believes that working with colleges and providers of online application platforms to create consistency would impact a large number of students.

Call to Action

- Colleges need to use writing sections to place prompts for all supplemental writing outside of the main essay on applications to increase transparency.
 - Example of why this is needed: Some colleges and universities place essay prompts in both the Writing and Questions sections of the Common App, making it difficult for students and counselors to understand what writing is required for each college.
- Institutions should clearly indicate essay requirements and deadlines for additional components (e.g. scholarships, Honors, majors, etc.) in all application platforms utilized.
- Allow counselors and advisors access to essay prompts and deadlines through counselor and advisor portals to better guide students.



Recommendation

- More accessible, uniform training and resources for college advisors, especially for those based in public schools.

Public school counselors are especially under-resourced and not always able to leave campus to acquire the college counseling training so vital to the diverse populations they serve.

Call to Action

- NACAC's regional affiliates should work with local districts to provide college counseling workshops as a part of in-service trainings, which are usually mandatory for public school counselors. This would widen the reach of college counseling training without counselors having to leave campus or add to an already burdensome schedule.
- Establish best practices for college counselors, creating clear guidelines and more universal messaging (e.g. average number of colleges to apply to, list exceptions, counseling on fit over rankings and prestige, and financial aid).
- NACAC should provide additional virtual workshops or panels addressing the topic of "fit" with representation of various types of institutions.



Recommendation

- More accessible workshops and resources for students with consistent language and messaging.

Without a centralized source of information for the college process, students experience anxiety filtering through the wealth of information available to them. It would be helpful for NACAC to provide online resources for students with uniform messaging about fit vs. prestige, financial aid, and other steps to apply to college to decrease anxiety for students. There was also consensus on the committee that students starting college planning earlier, in the ninth and tenth grades, could help to decrease anxiety and increase awareness, especially benefiting students from under-resourced populations.

Call to Action

- For NACAC to update the Step-by-Step Guide to be more teenager-friendly and contain current information, including guidance for estimating cost.
- More workshops (both in-person and virtual) for students with consistent guidance and language regarding fit over prestige, average number of colleges to apply to, financial aid, etc.



Recommendation

- More personalized attention and access to resources during the transition process from high school graduation to college enrollment.

Once students are admitted to college, the next steps in enrolling and transitioning to campus life can be confusing. We recommend that institutions strengthen relationships with families during the transition.

Call to Action

- Colleges and universities should create more personalized contact and communication with students and families between high school graduation and college enrollment.
- Colleges and universities should clearly identify and publish the process for receiving disability accommodation on transition websites and paperwork.
- Colleges and universities should clearly identify and publish mental health services available and articles about how to enlist help on transition websites and paperwork, as well as in enrolled student portals.



Additional Suggestions

The committee articulated the immediate challenges exacerbating student mental health in the transition to postsecondary education:

- Lack of education for high school educators regarding the college process and opportunities,
- Lack of education for high school students regarding the college process and opportunities,
- Lack of access to individualized college advising for high school students,
- Emphasis on prestige instead of “fit” by students, families, and college advisors,
- Students not starting the college planning process early enough,
- Lack of consistency in college applications,
- Lack of transparency in admissions and financial aid,
- Difficulty finding community and connecting with faculty and students upon postsecondary enrollment,
- Difficulty navigating campus support services and resources,
- Admissions offices too disconnected from the first-year experience/transition, and
- College access professionals feeling overburdened in the workplace, worsening their mental health.

In addition to immediate action items, the committee has identified recommendations for more long-term advocacy:

- Placement of experienced college counselors in high schools,
- Lower student to counselor ratios,
- Increase college financial aid advising to underclassmen (ninth and tenth graders)
- Include ranking metrics that measure and support student mental health and wellness,
- Extend length of first-year orientation, involving faculty and admissions in first-year experience outside of academic advising,
- Standardize the overall application process,
- Counselors leaving accredited programs with knowledge on admissions, financial aid, and counseling students from underrepresented backgrounds (online credential).
- Increase pay for college access professionals in public high schools and in college admissions, and
- Increase admissions staff when number of applications increasing.

Survey of College Admission and Counseling Professionals

Preliminary Findings*

Led by our Survey Subcommittee under the guidance of our greater committee membership, we thoughtfully developed two distinct surveys, one for postsecondary professionals and the other for those employed at secondary schools, community-based organizations, or independently. Our survey targeted four specific stages of the admission process, namely the college search process, college application process, college choice process, and college transition process.

To provide robust results, we leveraged our greatest asset, our membership of 26,000, as well as a sample of non-member secondary schools. We received 1,721 responses to our secondary survey and 444 responses to our postsecondary survey. We hope the results will contribute to research to empower NACAC and our colleagues on all sides of the desk to evolve our current practices to promote student mental health and wellbeing, specifically by:

1. Advising members of factors that contribute to student mental health concerns at different stages of the admission process.
2. Encouraging members to reflect on and assess their own practices.
3. Offering strategies and/or changes to promote student mental health at all stages of the process to practitioners on all sides of the desk.

Included below are our preliminary findings based on an analysis of the aggregate data. Our hope is for NACAC to disaggregate and critically analyze survey data results to inform its future priorities and initiatives related to student mental health, including concerted advocacy, recommendations and resources for members, additional ad hoc committees, etc.

Secondary Survey

Survey Respondents

	Number	Percent
TOTAL	1,721	
Type		
Secondary School Counselors	1,618	94.0
CBO Counselors	22	1.3
Independent Counselors	81	4.7
NACAC Member		
Yes	855	49.7
No	866	50.3

**This report is the first of several data-oriented reports to come related to the topic of student mental health in the transition to postsecondary education.*

College Search Stage

Definition for Survey Respondents:

The college search process comprises the period in which students explore and identify colleges to which they intend to apply. It does not include the actual application process, but any and all research and planning that occurs prior, including meeting with school counselors, visiting colleges, consulting college search resources and websites, etc.

Highlights from Aggregate Findings:

- More than 40 percent of counselors reported that each of the following had a high impact on student mental health and well-being during the college search process.
 - parent and family pressure and expectations
 - focus on prestige in their college application lists
 - concern about financial resources
 - challenges with time management
- Schools and counselors use a variety of strategies to support students during the college search process and mitigate any potential negative impacts.
 - More than 90 percent report providing individualized advising and emphasizing fit rather than prestige in their approach.
 - More than 70 percent encourage family involvement, provide a college planning calendar, and start the process early.
- When asked to rank order what changes would have the most positive impact on students, the largest proportion of counselors chose focusing on fit rather than prestige (41 percent) as the most important, followed by hiring more school and college counselors (21 percent).



Degree of Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Search Process

	High Impact (4)	Moderate Impact (3)	Little Impact (2)	No Impact (1)	Average Rating
Focus on prestige in college application list	46.3	33.6	17.4	2.7	3.2
Lack of familiarity with the process	36.7	44.2	18.5	0.6	3.2
Challenges with time management	40.5	48.9	10.1	0.5	3.3
Confronting feelings of inadequacy	32.6	48.5	17.9	1.0	3.1
Parent and family pressure and expectations	55.3	34.5	9.9	0.4	3.4
Concern about financial resources	46.2	36.6	15.9	1.3	3.3
Lack of support from knowledgeable adults	12.9	27.5	49.0	10.7	2.4
Volume of information	34.7	43.2	20.3	1.9	3.1
Inability to visit colleges	14.6	31.9	46.1	7.3	2.5
Fear of leaving the familiar and dealing with different climates and cultures	16.8	36.0	41.5	5.7	2.6



Strategies Used to Support Students During the College Search Process

	Percent
Emphasizing fit rather than prestige in counseling activities and materials	91.8
Starting the process and education earlier	77.9
Individualized advising	92.8
College planning calendar that breaks down the process	71.8
Allowing time for the process during the school day	58.3
Providing stress-relieving activities during the school year	34.6
Encouraging parent involvement	75.8
Providing opportunities for college visits	61.3
Providing college information in different languages	16.8

Changes That Would Have the Most Positive Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Search Process

	Percent Ranked #1	Percent Ranked #2	Percent Ranked #3
Focus on fit rather than prestige	41.1	15.3	10.9
Resources for counselors	3.9	7.9	10.3
Starting the process and education earlier	8.3	17.1	14.4
Individualized advising	14.0	21.5	0.0
College planning calendar that breaks down the process	2.3	5.5	9.8
Schools allowing time for the process during the day	4.6	10.6	12.6
Hiring more school and college counselors to reduce student caseloads	21.4	12.9	10.7
More parent involvement	2.6	3.8	5.2
More opportunities for college visits	1.4	4.7	5.5
More college information in different languages	0.4	0.8	1.2

College Application Stage

Definition for Survey Respondents:

The college application process is defined as the period that begins after a student decides the colleges to which to apply, and ends with the application being sent. This period in the process includes determining how to apply (website, Common App, etc.), completing the application, writing essays, proofreading, requesting official school documents including transcripts and teacher recommendations, and submitting the application to the university.

Highlights from Aggregate Findings:

- More than 40 percent of counselors reported that each of the following had a high impact on student mental health and well-being during the college *application* process.
 - parent and family pressure and expectations
 - challenges with time management
- Schools and counselors use a variety of strategies to support students during the college application process and mitigate any potential negative impacts.
 - More than 80 percent report providing individualized advising and application assistance, encouraging students to communicate with admission offices, and providing education about financial aid.
- Nearly 40 percent of counselors indicated that simplifying the process with consistent deadlines and application requirements would have the most positive impact on students.



Degree of Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Application Process

	High Impact (4)	Moderate Impact (3)	Little Impact (2)	No Impact (1)	Average Rating
Lack of consistency across colleges in application materials and deadlines	35.4	41.4	21.7	1.5	3.1
Lack of understanding of how applications are evaluated	31.3	46.4	21.4	1.0	3.1
Parental and family pressure including high expectations and focus on prestige	52.3	30.4	15.2	2.0	3.3
Challenges with time management	41.6	48.6	9.6	0.2	3.3
Feelings of inadequacy	24.1	43.5	21.4	0.9	3.0
Pressure to apply to unmanageable number of colleges	24.4	32.7	35.3	7.6	2.7
Lack of financial resources	35.6	34.2	26.7	3.5	3.0
Lack of support from knowledgeable adults	11.1	26.3	49.5	13.1	2.4



Strategies Used to Support Students During the College Application Process

	Percent
Individualized advising and application assistance	94.6
College planning resource/calendar to support time and task management	73.0
Allowing time to complete the application process during the school day	57.1
Encouraging communication between students and admission offices	84.5
Providing stress-relieving activities during the school year	33.0
Educating students and families about financial aid options and applications	87.8
Advising students to limit number of applications based on their individual circumstances	63.0

Changes That Would Have the Most Positive Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Application Process

	Percent Ranked #1	Percent Ranked #2	Percent Ranked #3
Simplifying the process with consistent deadlines and application requirements	37.7	21.7	14.4
Emphasizing fit rather than prestige in college counseling activities and materials	18.6	20.5	15.6
Resources for counselors with easy ways to navigate different college deadlines and requirements	2.1	8.7	11.0
Colleges being transparent about the evaluation process	12.4	19.0	21.3
Individualized advising	11.4	10.8	11.3
Schools allowing time to complete the application during the day	2.6	5.4	8.2
Improved communication between admission offices and students	1.3	4.4	7.0
Stress-relieving activities during the school year	0.5	0.7	1.6
Hiring more college and school counselors to reduce student caseload numbers	13.4	8.9	9.6

College Choice Stage

Definition for Survey Respondents:

The college choice process is defined as the experience of a student deciding which college they will commit to attending. This includes analyzing acceptances and waitlist offers, interpreting financial aid award letters, and submitting an enrollment deposit.

Highlights from Aggregate Findings:

- More than 40 percent of counselors reported that each of the following had a high impact on student mental health and well-being during the college choice process.
 - parent and family pressure and expectations
 - focus on prestige rather than fit
- Schools and counselors use a variety of strategies to support students during the college choice process and mitigate any potential negative impact.
 - More than 80 percent reported that they focus on fit rather than prestige in college counseling activities and materials, as well as discuss college selection during the application process.
- When asked to rank order what changes would have the most positive impact on students during the college choice process, the largest proportion of counselors chose focusing on fit rather than prestige (35 percent) as the most important, followed by standardizing the process to apply for financial aid (21 percent), and individual counseling sessions (21 percent).



Degree of Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Choice Process

	High Impact (4)	Moderate Impact (3)	Little Impact (2)	No Impact (1)	Average Rating
Lack of understanding of financial aid in general	34.8	45.9	17.9	1.4	3.1
Difficulty interpreting financial aid award letters and comparing options	37.8	42.2	18.5	1.4	3.2
Focus on prestige rather than fit	42.8	32.4	20.5	4.3	3.1
Parent and family pressure on students	44.9	38.8	14.9	1.4	3.3
College incentives that encourage earlier enrollment commitments	24.6	29.9	25.7	4.5	2.9
Navigating placement on waitlists	28.1	39.1	27.9	4.9	2.9
Inability of school/college counselors to provide individual guidance	14.2	21.9	37.1	26.9	2.2
Fear of leaving home and/or familiar environments	12.1	32.6	47.0	8.3	2.5



Strategies Used to Support Students During the College Choice Process

	Percent
Focusing on fit rather than prestige in college counseling activities and materials	86.0
Individual counseling sessions after admission decisions are released	73.7
Discussing college selection during the application process	84.8
Providing parent education around selecting a college	60.5
Providing stress-relieving activities for seniors during the selection process	27.6
Programming related to understanding financial aid awards	58.0

Changes That Would Have the Most Positive Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Choice Process

	Percent Ranked #1	Percent Ranked #2	Percent Ranked #3
Focusing on fit rather than prestige	35.2	13.4	13.1
Individual counseling sessions after admission decisions are released	20.6	25.2	17.5
Standardizing the process to apply for financial aid	21.2	18.8	13.7
More frequent individual advising/counseling	10.1	16.8	19.3
Discussing college selection during the application process	3.0	9.8	10.6
Professional development for counselors on how to counsel students and families through the selection process	5.2	6.8	11.1
Increasing parent involvement and education	4.2	8.2	11.6
Providing stress-relieving activities for seniors during the selection process	0.5	1.1	3.1

College Transition Stage

Definition for Survey Respondents:

The college transition process is defined as the transition from high school to college once the student has finalized their college choice. This includes students finding support systems; navigating academic, social, and financial challenges; and managing new levels of independence.

Highlights from Aggregate Findings:

- The most common strategies used by counselors to support students in the college transition process were:
 - Encouraging and supporting students in communicating directly with admission offices and university transition-related services (81 percent)
 - Destigmatizing seeking therapy and counseling (65 percent)
- When asked to rank order what changes would have the most positive impact on students during the college transition process, the largest proportion of counselors chose transition programming via workshops and activities (45 percent), as the most important.

Degree of Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Transition Process

	High Impact (4)	Moderate Impact (3)	Little Impact (2)	No Impact (1)	Average Rating
Lack of understanding about postsecondary life: scheduling and attending classes; interacting with professors	32.1	45.2	21.2	1.5	3.1
Difficulty finding community and connecting with faculty and students	24.9	47.9	25.7	1.5	3.0
Difficulty navigating campus support services and resources	24.3	48.3	25.5	1.8	3.0
Lack of support in the transition	23.6	42.8	30.8	2.8	2.9
Unexpected out-of-pocket expenses	24.5	27.7	23.5	3.7	2.9
Family expectations	27.7	44.0	26.4	1.9	3.0
Separation from existing support system	34.0	47.1	17.4	1.5	3.1
Lack of information from colleges during the transition	15.8	41.4	38.0	4.8	2.7
Difficulty with self-advocacy	31.6	46.5	20.5	1.3	3.1

Strategies Used to Support Students During the College Transition Process

	Percent
Transition programming via workshops and activities	40.2
Destigmatizing seeking therapy and counseling	65.3
Centralized online resource on the transition to college	15.2
Connecting students to current college students before orientation	38.2
Encouraging and supporting students in communicating directly with admission office and university transition-related services	81.2
Establishing cohorts for students attending the same colleges	12.1
Organizing college visits before enrolling	26.9

Changes That Would Have the Most Positive Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Transition Process

	Percent Ranked #1	Percent Ranked #2	Percent Ranked #3
Transition programming via workshops and activities (provided by high schools and/or colleges)	45.2	16.9	13.8
Destigmatizing seeking therapy and counseling	16.4	19.4	12.1
Centralized online resource on the transition to college	7.9	15.8	13.2
Connecting students with current college students before orientation	7.2	15.1	16.8
Collaboration between college departments to consolidate messaging and support	4.1	6.1	8.5
More admission office involvement in the transition via communication with students and counselors	5.5	9.4	14.0
College admission offices establishing cohorts for incoming students and creating peer groups for first-year students	10.7	14.1	16.8
Organizing college visits before enrolling	3.0	3.2	4.9

Postsecondary Survey

For the survey of postsecondary admission professionals, survey participants were asked to respond to questions that applied only to the college transition stage.

College Transition Stage

Definition for Survey Respondents:

The college transition process is defined as the transition from high school to college once the student has finalized their college choice. This includes students finding support systems; navigating academic, social, and financial challenges; and managing new levels of independence.

Highlights from Aggregate Findings:

- More than 40 percent of college admission professionals reported that each of the following had a high impact on student mental health and well-being during the college *transition* process.
 - Unexpected out-of-pocket expenses
 - Difficulty finding community and connecting with faculty and students
- Colleges use a variety of strategies to support students during the college *transition* process and mitigate any potential negative impacts.
 - More than 70 percent reported that they provide transition programming, communicate with students and counselors during the transition, and work to destigmatize counseling and therapy.



Degree of Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Transition Process

	High Impact (4)	Moderate Impact (3)	Little Impact (2)	No Impact (1)	Average Rating
Lack of understanding about postsecondary life: scheduling and attending classes; interacting with professors	26.5	58.5	15.0	0.0	3.1
Difficulty finding community and connecting with faculty and students	43.5	40.1	15.0	1.4	3.3
Difficulty navigating campus support services and resources	34.0	44.7	19.3	1.8	3.1
Lack of support in the transition	30.6	36.3	30.2	2.7	3.0
Unexpected out-of-pocket expenses	47.4	33.8	17.9	0.7	3.3
Family expectations	31.7	42.9	22.0	2.0	3.1
Separation from existing support system	36.1	44.7	17.2	1.6	3.2
Difficulty with self-advocacy	39.0	42.4	17.0	1.1	3.2

Strategies Used to Support Students During the College Transition Process

	Percent
Transition programming via workshops and activities	83.7
Destigmatizing seeking therapy and counseling	74.1
Centralized online resource on the transition to college	39.9
Connecting students to current college students before orientation	52.6
Collaboration between college departments to consolidate messaging and support	49.9
Admission office involvement in the transition via communication with students and counselors	78.5
Establishing cohorts for incoming students and creating peer groups for first-year students	63.7
Organizing college visits before enrolling	66.7
Facilitating a smooth transition from admission staff to student affairs	58.7

Changes That Would Have the Most Positive Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being During the College Transition Process

	Percent Ranked #1	Percent Ranked #2	Percent Ranked #3
Transition programming via workshops and activities	19.7	15.8	17.7
Destigmatizing seeking therapy and counseling	14.7	13.5	11.7
Centralized online resource on the transition to college	11.9	10.1	13.3
Connecting students with current college students before orientation	11.9	16.5	13.5
Collaboration between college departments to consolidate messaging and support	6.2	11.9	11.5
Admission office involvement in the transition via communication with students and counselors	6.7	6.2	8.5
Establishing cohorts for incoming students and creating peer groups for first-year students	17.9	12.8	11.9
Organizing college visits before enrolling	4.6	4.4	4.6
Improving the transition from admission staff to student affairs	6.4	8.7	7.3

