

NACAC

National Association for
College Admission Counseling



Centering Students in Equitable Admission Practices

Made possible by:

THE
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FOUNDATION



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About NACAC:

The [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) (NACAC), founded in 1937, is a membership organization of more than 26,000 professionals from around the world 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 American Youth Policy Forum:

The [American Youth Policy Forum](#) (AYPF) is a non-profit, nonpartisan, professional development organization that provides learning opportunities for policy leaders, practitioners, and researchers working on education, youth, and workforce policy at the national, state, and local levels.

About Dax-Dev:

Dax-Dev is a disruptive, equity venture led by Dax-Devlon Ross. Dax-Dev focuses on social impact consulting to help individuals, organizations and institutions achieve their social justice missions and bridge the gap between their stated values and actual practices. Dax-Dev tells deeply reported, truth-seeking stories that advance social justice and civil rights.

About The Kresge Foundation:

The [Kresge Foundation](#) is a private philanthropic foundation working to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing.

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The admission process for many postsecondary institutions was not fundamentally designed to promote equity.

Executive Summary

The admission process for many postsecondary institutions was not fundamentally designed to promote equity. It was especially not designed to put students' needs at the center of the process, let alone to give them decision-making power in institutional policies and practices. However, the year 2020—punctuated by a racial reckoning and global pandemic—presented the industry with the opportunity to radically reorganize its values and structure. This flashpoint served as the impetus for the creation of the joint NACAC/NASFAA publication *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access* in 2022. The report includes multiple recommendations on how colleges and universities can restructure their core policies, systems, and structures to be more equitable for historically underrepresented populations. One of the recommendations for institutions was to ensure that student voices were centered in decision-making processes.

To operationalize this recommendation, and with the support of The Kresge Foundation, NACAC created the Centering Students in the Creation of Equitable Admission Practices ad hoc committee.

The committee, which included both professional and student members, was charged with creating a **model** for student engagement and a **framework** to assist institutions and NACAC in identifying opportunities for student engagement in service to equity in admission policy and practice.

Model for Engaging Students

The process associated with the committee's work can provide a model for institutions seeking to increase or improve student engagement on campus:

Financial Resources: Allocate financial resources for building the engagement process, utilizing expert partners when available. Ensure that all student engagement efforts include incentives or compensation for student participation.

Representation: Emphasize inclusion of a broad representation of students to fit the objectives for engagement.

Preparation: Ensure that students have adequate background preparation to inform the discussion or decision-making process.



Setting Expectations: Gather students prior to engaging with university administrators to set expectations and objectives for engagement.

Facilitation: Where possible, engage with facilitators to remove potential bias from the interaction. If facilitation is impractical, identify an internal stakeholder who can facilitate from a detached perspective.

Follow Through on Student Guidance: To the extent feasible, institutions should make a good faith effort to implement recommendations provided by students. In addition, reflect student feedback in outcomes that result from student engagement. In the context of college admission, such reflection can help students and families better understand and appreciate the institution’s approach to their recruitment and admission processes.

Framework for Engaging Students in Admission Practice and Policy Decision-Making

Student committee members exhibited broad agreement in three primary areas:

1. There are implicit or explicit biases in the way colleges are marketed.
2. Knowing what they know now, students would have approached the college application process differently a second time around.
3. The college application process is **not** equitable.

The framework included in this report provides an exhaustive list of the admission policy and practice decision-making points at which colleges and universities can and potentially should regularly involve students. The framework is comprised of the following core components:

1. Admission

- a. Finding and Appealing to Students
 - i. Training, Travel, and Budgeting
 - ii. Marketing
 - iii. Name Purchases and Connecting to Prospective Students
- b. The Application
 - i. Application Process
 - ii. Admission Criteria



2. Financial Aid

- a. Information for Students and Families
 - i. Tools
 - ii. Aid Notification Letters
 - iii. Disclosure and Transparency
- b. Financial Aid Process
 - i. Financial Aid Award and Structure
 - ii. Questions from Students

3. Institutional Governance

- a. Institutional Purposes and Objectives
 - i. Mission
 - ii. Programs
 - iii. Student Experience
- b. Institutional Operation and Sustainability
 - i. Tuition and Scholarship Aid
 - ii. Institutional Branding and Marketing



With this model and framework, NACAC encourages colleges and universities to engage with students as partners in the admission policy and practice decision-making process, particularly focusing on those students who are currently under-represented in postsecondary education.



Introduction and Context:

“We are more than what can be seen on an application.”

—Student committee member

The Centering Student Voices committee can trace its origins back to January 2022, when NACAC published a joint paper with NASFAA titled, [Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access](#). Funded by the Lumina Foundation, the report provided a broad series of recommendations for colleges and universities hoping to restructure their college application and admission systems to be more equitable. Recommendations relevant to this report include:

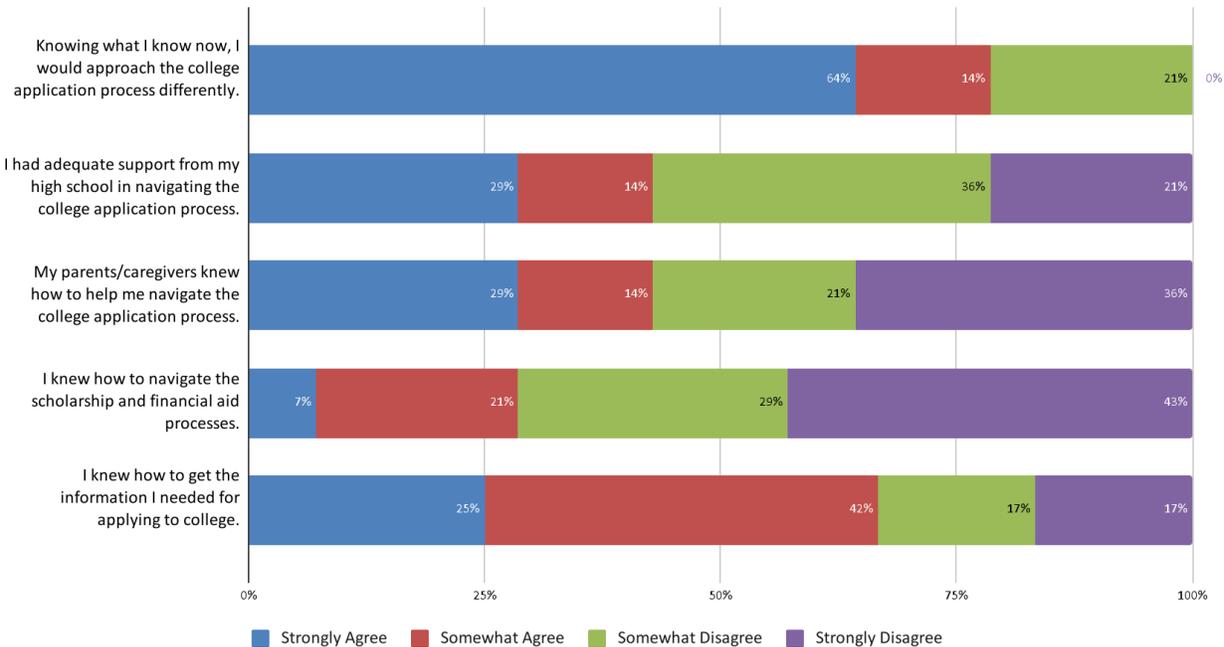
- **Getting on the “balcony”¹:** The thought leadership panel convened for this report quickly realized admission and financial aid officers often do not have the time to lift themselves outside of their regular work to think broadly and systemically about equity. In general, they noted that the less time professionals spend thinking about and planning for equity, the less equitable they will be. As such, the report recommended that institutions regularly allocate “balcony time” above the fray to consider equity challenges at their institution and beyond.
- **Minimizing the application burden on students:** After discussing the admission process with students of color, the report committee found that the college application process presented multiple barriers to access. The report recommended that institutions analyze available technology and K-12 data and explore ways to reduce the need for a separate application in favor of a more streamlined system that eliminates barriers to access.
- **Rethinking what we consider as admission criteria and why:** Students often described the application process as a set of activities and considerations that often seemed divorced from the K-12 experience and/or designed to hold them to a different standard than more privileged and/or white students. Standardized testing, unequal access to curricular and extracurricular activities, essays, and letters of recommendation were frequently cited as examples of ways in which the admission process added “sediment” on top of students’ strengths as demonstrated through K-12 achievements and experiences. The report recommended that colleges carefully consider what they ask students to submit and whether those requirements (a) provide colleges with useful information about students’ potential for success, and (b) create equity challenges that could be reduced or by eliminating or replacing them.

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>

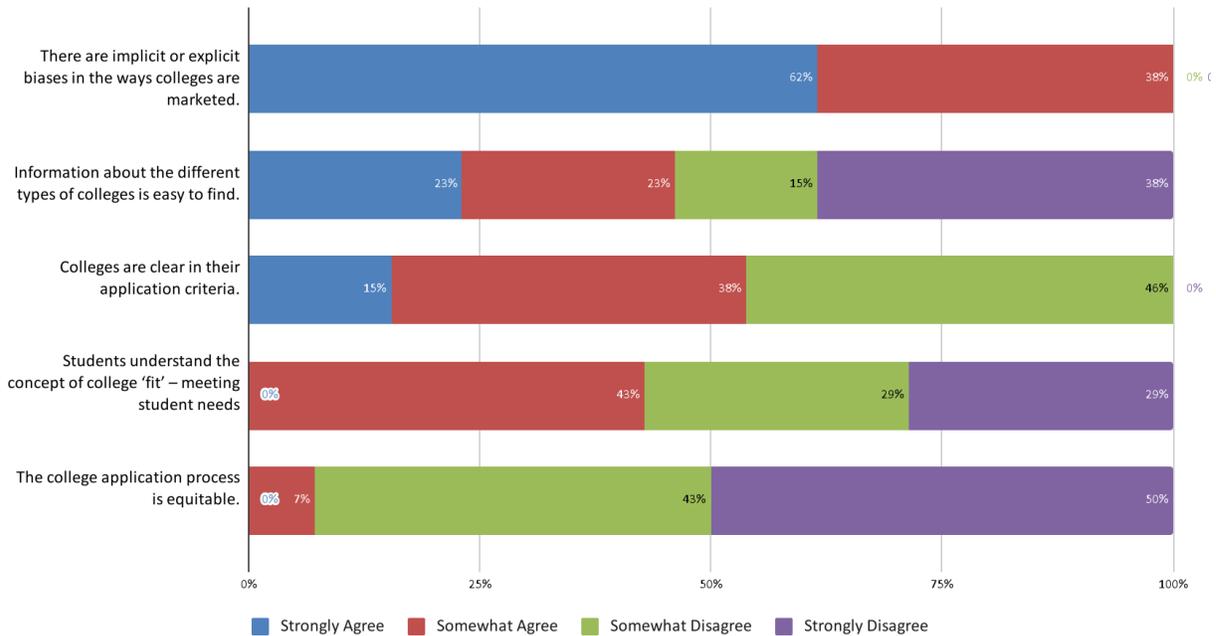
- Diversifying the face of the institution:** Students involved in the project noted that at many institutions, they were unable to see or relate to someone who looked like or deeply understood them during the application process. While admission offices have diversified over the years, they are still less representative of under-represented populations than the student bodies at four-year institutions, which are in turn less representative of the overall population. As admission offices seek to further diversify, engaging with prospective and current students of color will be an imperative if institutions are to better understand and serve successive generations of college applications.

Each of these recommendations can and should be informed by student perspectives. The ad hoc committee convened student members in a focus group-style conversation to understand how students were generally oriented toward the college admission process. As part of each focus group, participants responded to ten poll questions regarding 1) their personal experiences navigating their own application process and 2) their perspectives on the overall fairness of various aspects of the college application process. The data presented on the following page provides insights into both categories. The first chart reflects participant experiences. The second chart reflects participant perspectives:

Poll Responses Part 1



Poll Responses Part 2



As these perspectives suggest, students exhibited broad agreement in three primary areas:

1. There are implicit or explicit biases in the way colleges are marketed.
2. Knowing what they know now, students would have approached the college application process differently a second time around.
3. The college application process is **not** equitable.

These three findings reinforce the recommendation from NACAC’s 2022 report that if colleges are to improve their admission processes for equity, they should regularly engage students, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds. Students are keenly aware of the aspects of college admission that are biased, inequitable, and difficult to manage, and they have valuable insights into how policy and practice can change.

Common themes that pervaded the students' feedback included:

- **Communications clarity:** Accuracy, transparency, and understandability were key elements of student feedback across the functional areas.² Students frequently cited being overwhelmed by information that, at times, can be contradictory, confusing, and inaccurate.
- **Accessibility:** In general, students found information difficult to access, whether due to the volume of information or the ways in which information is presented (or hidden) across college web sites and materials.
- **Resources:** Despite ample funding for marketing and outreach at postsecondary institutions, students indicated a need for greater assistance in navigating the volumes of information, complex processes, and multiple steps involved in applying to and enrolling in college.

Before addressing the specific elements of the admission process where student input can be valuable, the committee believed that articulating its process for engaging with students for this project constituted a helpful structural model for institutions seeking to engage students regularly.



² NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* contains best practices with respect to transparency in admission information. See: <https://www.nacacnet.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/guiding-ethics/>

A Model for Engaging Students

Findings of the NACAC/NASFAA report suggested that student voices be represented and incorporated into the design of university admission policy and practice. As institutions aim to reduce student burden and improve equity in admission, it becomes imperative that they provide forums for strategic thinking—getting on the balcony—to plan broadly and systemically for improving equity. However, while staff and faculty can make assumptions on how to best serve their student populations, without direct and consistent student feedback, the assumptions are just that. As such, NACAC recommended that students join institutional leaders on the balcony to inform and provide recommendations for all aspects of the college admission process.

MODEL FEATURE 1

Allocate financial resources for building the engagement process, utilizing expert partners when available. Ensure that all student engagement efforts include incentives or compensation for student participation.

During the committee's work, several professional members noted that they often found it difficult to obtain student feedback through opportunities such as surveys, discussion groups, or other less formal means. As a critical construct for this project, NACAC sought to ensure that students would have an incentive to provide critical feedback and sustained engagement throughout, given that they, too, have an abundance of work/life considerations—particularly students who are currently under-represented in higher education—that can make extra-curricular participation in this type of effort difficult.

To operationalize this work, NACAC secured a grant from The Kresge Foundation, a critical source of external support that helped ensure NACAC had the resources to fully engage with and compensate the student members of the committee. The foundation's support also allowed NACAC to engage with an external facilitator to ensure that feedback could be provided in a structured and uninhibited format. The committee itself consisted of a unique hybrid membership of NACAC member professionals and students. The student members of the committee were identified and managed by the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that provides opportunities for policy leaders, practitioners, and researchers working on education, youth, and workforce policy to engage with young people. AYPF collected a pool of 15 young people, most of whom are high schoolers or college students, to provide their feedback on their experiences in the college admission process. This unique partnership allowed the committee to discuss and ideate on how to best involve students in the creation and maintenance of equitable college admission policies in a manner never previously seen.

MODEL FEATURE 2

Emphasize inclusion of a broad representation of students to fit the objectives for engagement.

For this project, AYPF selected students who represented a diverse range of backgrounds, though all of whom in one way or another were under-represented in postsecondary education. Students represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, geographic locales, institutional type and selectivity, and a wide range of neuro- and physical abilities. Inclusion was a priority for this project given the underlying emphasis on improving equity in college access.

MODEL FEATURE 3

Ensure that students have adequate background preparation to inform the discussion or decision-making process.

For this ad hoc committee, NACAC, in conjunction with AYPF, shared pre-discussion materials with the student members of the committee that included the NACAC/NASFAA report serving as a backdrop for this committee's work. In addition, the professional members of the committee developed a comprehensive map of admission policy and practice decision-making that was shared with the student members to appreciate the scope of the committee's objectives in seeking their feedback. (See Appendix for the map of policy and practice decision-making.)

MODEL FEATURE 4

Gather students prior to engaging with university administrators to set expectations and objectives for engagement.

Prior to the focus group work, NACAC staff and co-chairs met with student members of the committee to ensure that they had the opportunity to ask questions about the purpose of the project, the objectives and outcomes we hoped to produce, and the overall approach to soliciting their feedback. The committee co-chairs and NACAC staff went to great lengths to assure students that their candid feedback was not only invited but encouraged.

MODEL FEATURE 5

Where possible, engage with facilitators to remove potential bias from the interaction. If facilitation is impractical, identify an internal stakeholder who can facilitate from a detached perspective.

For this project, NACAC worked with Dax-Dev to structure and facilitate students' input. Students can feel intimidated and/or inhibited when working with university officials, so a first objective was to provide a facilitative presence to ensure that students felt comfortable providing candid feedback. In addition, administrators (and professionals in general, in any field) can use jargon and assume knowledge that students may not have or understand. Providing facilitation for the project helped ensure that questions to which the committee sought answers were delivered in a way that prompted informed feedback from students.

MODEL FEATURE 6

To the extent feasible, institutions should make a good faith effort to implement recommendations provided by students. In addition, reflect student feedback in outcomes that result from student engagement. In the context of college admission, such reflection can help students and families better understand and appreciate the institution's approach to their recruitment and admission processes.

Collecting student feedback should not be a performative exercise. When feasible, institutions should make a good faith effort to follow through on student recommendations. Similarly, recognizing student participation and input achieves at least two very important goals. First, it provides students with visibility and recognition that they can use to advance their personal, educational, or career interests. Second, it sends a powerful signal to stakeholders, including prospective students and their families, that institutional decision-making has incorporated student input. Promoting student- and equity-centered admission practice is one of NACAC's priorities for the profession. Recognizing the student contribution to policy and practice is similarly a form of accountability to demonstrate that organizational or institutional practices are student-informed.

Youth Engagement in Principle

NACAC’s partnership with the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) on this project provides a broader context for youth engagement that will be useful to institutions and associations as they engage with students. An extensive body of research demonstrates the benefits of youth engagement to both the students and the institutions or organizations that serve them.³ According to AYPF,

“Youth engagement must be authentic, intentional, and committed to the empowerment and success of the youth participants. Some seek out young people, not for their knowledge, but for their stories, often of trauma. We should ensure that young people are not tokenized to ‘check a box’ or exploited for their personal stories to elicit emotional responses from audiences. For lawmakers and school officials to create policies that reflect the strengths and realities of our young people and achieve positive outcomes—especially including the goals they have for themselves and their communities—their voice must be at the center of the policymaking process.”⁴

This overarching philosophy guided the ad hoc committee efforts and will continue to inspire NACAC’s efforts to be inclusive of student perspectives.



³ American Youth Policy Forum, Research and Resources, 2023. See: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:ea6fdeb2-ffa9-3dd2-b480-dcfc8f5784fb>

⁴ “Make No Choice Without Youth Voice,” Kameryn Point, American Youth Policy Forum, July 8, 2022. See: <https://www.aypf.org/blog/make-no-choice-without-youth-voice/>

Framework for Centering Student Voices in the College Admission Policy and Practice Decision-Making Process

At the outset of the committee's work, the professional members created a comprehensive schematic map that provided a detailed overview of the decision-making processes that institutions typically must undertake to design and implement their admission process each year. The resulting map is included in the appendix to this report.

Mapping these themes to processes involved in establishing admission and financial aid policy and practice required a simplification of processes into functional areas, including:

1. The application, admission, and enrollment process
2. Financial aid and paying for college
3. Institutional governance

These process groupings are explored in more detail below.

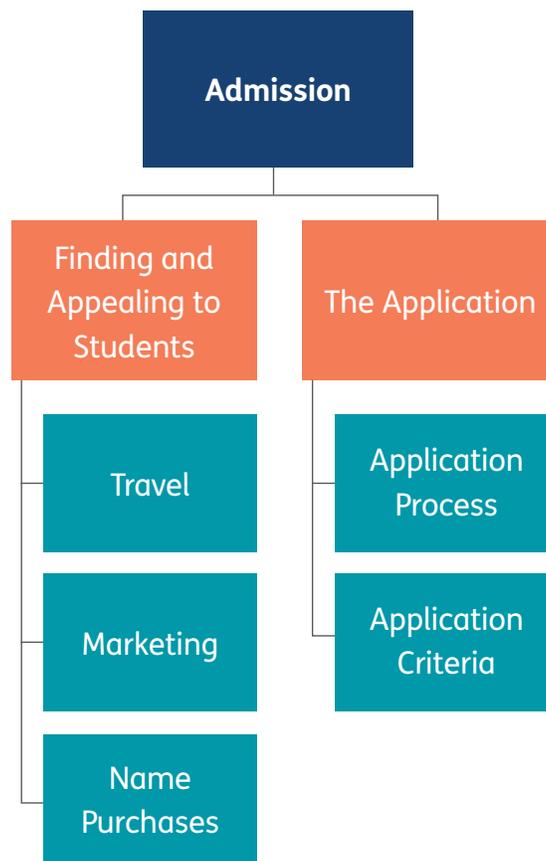
Presenting the complex map of decision-making was not feasible with students, so facilitators crafted questions that would prompt student feedback about the **results** of those decision-making processes. This feedback was subsequently fitted to the decision map, which resulted in a thematically grouped framework. The purpose of this framework is to provide a detailed overview of all of the opportunities colleges *could* take to engage with students when making decisions about admissions. The committee remains mindful that many colleges do regularly seek student input on these issues and that there may be opportunities that our effort did not identify.

In any case, the committee intends for this document to be a reference guide to assist colleges and universities with student engagement in service to equity.



1. The Recruitment, Application, and Admission Process

Roughly one-third of the decision-making processes related to a typical admission cycle are aggregated into the first broad section of the report pertaining to the recruitment, application, and admission processes.



As the graphic above indicates, professional members of the committee identified decision-making processes attached to activities relating to (1) finding and appealing to students and (2) the college application. Regularly integrating student voices into these processes is an important lever for equity in the future. Many institutions currently practice student engagement in these areas, though many do not and those that do often find it difficult to secure student participation.

Training, Travel, and Budgeting

To promote equity, committee members identified staff travel and budgeting decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Annual planning for travel and territory management
- Training for admission staff on how to engage with students from differing backgrounds
- Planning DEI training programs aimed at facilitating a broad understanding of diverse student needs
- Discussions about application fees
- Campus visit scheduling: time of year, day of week, time of day, when in student life cycle
- Planning effective high school visits
- On and off campus event planning
- Deciding when and what type of recruitment events to offer virtually or in person
- Design and timing of fly-in programs

“We didn’t have any of the colleges come in and talk to us about their programs, or what they had to offer; we only had vocational and armed forces come in and talk to us about [...] pathways outside of education.”

—Student committee member

“I went to an alternative high school. And we were so focused on making sure that kids were even able to graduate that we didn’t really have a long-term focus on the next step like college prep stuff. I also think a lot of colleges tend to reach out to the more known high schools when it comes around the time to start applying to, like, present to students, and do all different kinds of info sessions, but I don’t think they technically reach out to the alternative high schools.”

—Student committee member

“I think the first thing that stood out to me was how there are lots of application fees for college, which automatically puts those who are in poverty or who do not make much money already at a disadvantage.”

—Student committee member

Marketing

To promote equity, committee members identified marketing decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Admissions website design and consumer testing
- Consumer testing for clarity of admission requirements and processes
- Design of marketing materials
- Communication about diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Ordering of giveaways and marketing materials
- Prospective student social media management
- Paid digital marketing
- Communication categories
- Modes of communication
- Recruitment marketing campaigns
- Multi-language communications



“School websites [...] just felt very vague in a lot of places.”

—Student committee member

“It does seem like there’s more minorities at the school [in marketing materials] than there really are [...] Just speaking as a Black person in America, that can be a lot, it can be very overwhelming.”

—Student committee member

“ Giving people more information about how to pick schools they are interested in going to [would be helpful]. [...]Part of it is trying to make people think about what they want from a school and them also being able to research what schools will give them what they want.”

—Student committee member

⁵ Students noted that generic marketing materials (i.e., those developed by consulting firms) were easily identifiable and presented an impersonal, generic front, as opposed to a more student-centric approach. Navigating issues like academic and cultural fit, physical location, and major selection can be very difficult for those who have never previously attempted the process. Students stated that they want comprehensive information straight from the institutions.

Name Purchases / Identifying Prospective Students

To promote equity, committee members identified student contact decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Assessment of reach of existing student information list purchases
- Planning for college fair training and travel
- Geographic and economic mobility of students
- Understanding demographic shifts
- Discussing geo-market trends inquiry-app-yield
- Deposit processing and onboarding
- Origin source analysis for ROI
- Inquiry generation
- Number of search campaigns/when in student life cycle



“I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to go on college tours, with an organization in my city. And so I feel like without that, I wouldn’t have even known that there were other schools that were within my region that were attainable.”

—Student committee member



Application Process

To promote equity, committee members identified application process decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- The application itself, including function and form
- Student-facing guidance on completing the application
- Articulation of application requirements on web site
- Development of information for families
- Post-enrollment feedback on application process

“Colleges should be 100% clear about the expectations of the college during the application process since it is so expensive and can be very difficult to achieve success as a first-generation student.”

—*Student committee member*

“I think communication around placement tests, when onboarding, and when completing the whole beginning phase would have been great.”

—*Student committee member*

“A lot of students can use College Board to access fee waivers. I had quite a few friends who just didn’t have financial documentation from their parents. So they couldn’t get the fee waivers, because they weren’t eligible for them.” Another echoed, “Access to these forms would be helpful. Not everyone has the means to be able to access each of these [forms].”

—*Student committee member*

“[The application is] very overwhelming and daunting.”

—*Student committee member*

Admission Criteria

To promote equity, committee members identified application criteria decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Score requirement and reporting policies
- Discussions regarding weighted grade point averages (GPAs), recalculations
- Innovations in admission, such as direct admission
- Readmission policies and recruitment
- Accepting unofficial/self-reported vs official materials (transcripts, scores)
- Consideration of demonstrated interest
- Class parameters, or what the class will look like; conversation with student affairs
- Institutional academic requirements and relationship of requirements to success at institution

“I wish it were more personalized. If someone is a strong writer, they can write an essay. If they’re amazing at public speaking, they could give a speech on how they would impact the school. Everyone is unique in the matters of what they bring to the table, so admissions should focus on that.”

—Student committee member

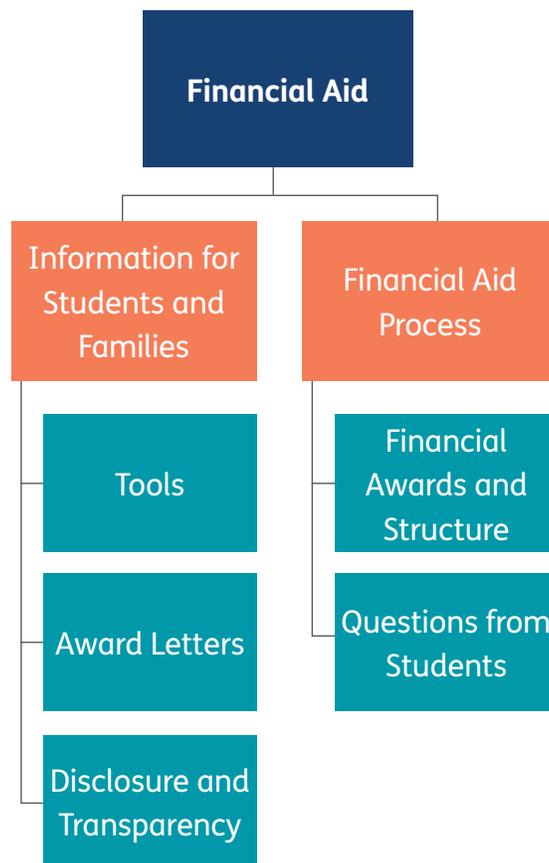
“If we are trying to build more equity, [and] give more people the chance to go and get into college, if people focus on side activities more than good grades, they’re going to leave out all the people who did not have time to go and do the side activities. People who have to go and work to support the family[...] there’s a lot of reasons why someone can’t go and do a bunch of clubs and a bunch of sports and show off all this other stuff they’re doing because they have to, as soon as they’re done with school, they have to go back and survive, basically.”

—Student committee member

“I wanted to bring up that college isn’t all one size fits all. And that not every student has the same background as the other. And so just keeping that in mind when students are coming through for admissions that there are a lot of differences and a lot of things that don’t necessarily match up for other students and just being open to working with those students to fit their needs better.”

—Student committee member

2. Financial Aid and Paying for College



Tools

To promote equity, committee members identified decisions about financial aid tools that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Description of/updates to tuition and fees
- Financial aid web site design
- Fee waiver discussions for increasingly diverse circumstances
- Development of tools to help students understand what they and their families will have to pay

“I didn’t even know you could still owe money if you took out loans and got financial aid. I’m still figuring stuff out as I go.”

—Student committee member

Aid Notification Letters

To promote equity, committee members identified financial aid notification decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Design of aid notification letters—consumer testing
- Regular feedback from students and families about notification letters post-enrollment
- Development of tools to assist in interpretation and comparison of aid notification letters⁶

“[I would like to see] a clearer way to access your award, what your balance would be projected, [...] your loans and financial aid and etcetera. My school personally has multiple different things you have to go to (to) access different rewards. So, my loans are accessed on a separate site, then my financial aid. And if I call financial aid, they’re not allowed to talk to me about loans, I have to call the bursar’s office, and then they can’t talk to me about financial aid. So, I could be working on one problem and having to hop back and forth between two different departments. If there was a more unified way to talk about financial complications, and access[ing] financial information, I feel that would be easier for me.”

—Student committee member



⁶ The leaders of 10 higher education associations, including NACAC and NASFAA have formed a collaborative effort to improve the clarity, accuracy, and consistency of student financial aid offers by producing a set of guiding principles and minimal standards to be used when developing aid offers. See: <https://www.collegeprice.org/>

Disclosure and Transparency

To promote equity, committee members identified disclosure and transparency decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Net price calculator effectiveness
- Student loans and helping to inform accurate conversation about borrowing and return on investment (ROI)
- Efforts to assist students with completing FAFSA and other aid forms
- Creating transparency about the price, such as sticker price vs. net price, cost with and without loans
- Communication with families about percent of need met
- Clarity about institutional scholarships, requirements to earn and renew

“I think just getting information about all the different scholarships that are out there. They would be really helpful because you don’t know. [...] There’s so many opportunities [that are] not really talked about. So getting more information out there would be really helpful.”

—*Student committee member*

“I personally did not get a lot of financial aid talk or what the financials look[ed] like [...] and that kept me away from [enrolling] because I didn’t want to go into debt, I didn’t want to not be able to afford it.”

—*Student committee member*

“Growing up in white neighborhoods and everything, there’s a lot of stigma about not being able to afford college[...] So just more information about financial aid and all the different routes of financial aid that you can go through, just to make that information a little bit more accessible [would be great], so that it’s not such a scary topic for students.”

—*Student committee member*

Financial Awards and Structure

To promote equity, committee members identified financial awards and structure decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Differential impacts of billing and disbursement policies
- Supreme Court ruling and impact on existing financial aid policies
- Institutional decision on forms required

“A lot of higher education institutions will recruit in lower socio economic, like Communities in Schools, despite the fact that they’re unable to provide financial aid for the population, the entirety of the population that which they are recruiting sort of creates this disproportionate illusion of opportunity that inflates or deflates their acceptance rates, I should say. So it only helps their statistics, creates this illusion of accessibility to these schools that never actually ends up like being on par with what’s going on”

—Student committee member

Questions from Students

To promote equity, committee members identified student/customer service decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Verification process
- Cultural/religious debt resistance
- Noncustodial parent challenges and institutional understanding of expanding definitions of family
- Establishing training programs for admission recruiters to answer questions about financial aid from students and families

“I haven’t gotten my financial aid package or anything yet. They just asked for a lot of tax documents and more and more tax documents, every every every week. I don’t really know what’s going on.”

—Student committee member

“One of my friends, for example, his parents were separated, and he couldn’t access his dad’s tax returns for the last three years. The idea of advertising financial accessibility while also not taking into account the specific familial and social contexts that might make it difficult to just apply for financial aid in the first place, I think is one of the biases that come into play here.”

—Student committee member

3. Institutional Governance



Mission

To promote equity, committee members identified admission application process decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Institutional clarity about the diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly the alignment of admission practices to mission principles
- Enrollment planning and targets
- Books, board, technology, transportation
- Board of Trustees vision for strategic plan goals
- Honor code development
- Access to auxiliary services, especially availability of housing, costs, and filling beds
- Accreditation

- Regulatory compliance
- Distribution (%) of the class by academic areas
- Enrollment revenue planning/budgeting and departmental goals
- Academic and class profile goals
- DEI/Access initiatives—goals, financial support for programming, partnerships/agreements
- Revenue goals
- Enrollment goals; total headcount/FTE system and campus levels
- Academic policies related to satisfactory academic progress (SAP)
- Outreach programs/initiatives part of strategic plans
- Cross cutting institutional priorities that impact admission and aid (i.e. sustainability)

“The only time I felt like [the college] recognized that they did have a Black student body was when they were looking to ask for donations from Alumni Services or things like that. So, it’s like, you don’t really want to encompass the fact that you do have Black students on your campus unless you are using them [for] extra money and [to] get people to donate.”

—Student committee member

“Diversity is different than inclusion and is defined differently by different institutions.”

—Student committee member

Programs

To promote equity, committee members identified decisions about institutional programs that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Determining which offerings might be more successful as an online program vs resident instruction
- General education curriculum
- Shifts in academic interests and impact on curricular offerings and faculty FTEs
- Additional academic program offerings or majors

The Student Experience

To promote equity, committee members identified student experience decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Student experiences/student compacts
- Student employment
- On campus housing requirements
- Student development and support services

“Having diversity in the school and feeling like there’s a sense of inclusion and students of color don’t feel like they’re really ‘other than’ at the school. And just having supports from the administration, I think would be like one major thing for having a good school environment.”

—Student committee member

“Getting to college look[s] different for every single one of their students, staying in college and graduating college will also look different for every student. Regardless, every student deserves to be supported.”

—Student committee member

Tuition and Scholarship Policy

To promote equity, committee members identified tuition and scholarship policy decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Establishment of institutional tuition and fee policy—institutional leadership and trustees
- Discussions about net tuition revenue
- Policies related to tuition discounting and non-need-based aid
- Conversations about the percent of need met by the institution
- Discussions about institutional approach to cost of attendance (COA)
- Endowed scholarships or development initiatives with aims to help students—institutional leadership and trustees

“A lot of higher education institutions will recruit in lower socioeconomic communities and schools, despite the fact that they’re unable to provide financial aid for the population. The entirety of that population [in which] they are recruiting sort of creates this disproportionate illusion of opportunity.... [It] creates this illusion of accessibility to these schools that never actually ends up being on par with what’s going on.”

—Student committee member

- College or program level scholarship
- Department grants that have enrollment metrics tied to them
- Institutional financial aid budget

Institutional Branding and Marketing

To promote equity, committee members identified institutional branding and marketing decisions that would benefit from consistent student engagement:

- Overall branding and building brand equity
- Academic program promotions
- Marketing policies—whether institutional marketing and communications are oriented and organized for equity

Students involved in the project noted that at many institutions, they were unable to see or relate to someone who looked like or deeply understood them during the application process.

Opportunity for Future Research and Discussion

A process such as this often uncovers as many questions as it answers. In the case of this committee, one such set of questions pertained to the role of students in shaping the K-12 experience, particularly as it pertains to postsecondary readiness and preparation. Student members of the committee differed widely in their experiences with college preparation, thus had diverging perspectives on the effectiveness of their school in assisting with their transition to college. Likewise, there is a ready population of school counselors and college advisors who can provide similar insights into the decision-making processes that drive policy and practice at the K-12 level. While outside the scope of this project, a robust exploration of the student experience in K-12 schools would seem a logical next step.



Conclusion

As the NACAC-NASFAA report in 2022 noted, while college admission and financial aid professionals will continue to strive for more equitable practices, the roots of many of the policies and practices that affect equity in college access extend across practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers. As such, this report has documented a set of recommendations that we hope will spark further exploration, discussion, and implementation, perhaps yielding yet more ideas and opportunities to improve racial equity. Such work will of necessity continue for many years and should involve stakeholders at all levels.

“Policy and reform efforts focusing on student voice are particularly salient during a period in which there is increased recognition of the demand for educational institutions to respond to the needs and concerns of youth from marginalized backgrounds.”

—Joseph Kahne, Benjamin Bowyer, Jessica Marshall, and Erica Hodgkin, *American Journal of Education*⁷



⁷ Kahne, Joseph, Bowyer, Benjamin, Marshall, Jessica, and Hodgkin, Erica. “Is Responsiveness to Student Voice Related to Academic Outcomes? Strengthening the Rationale for Student Voice in School Reform,” *American Journal of Education*, Volume 128, Number 3, May 2022.

Appendix

Map of Decision-Making Processes for Policy and Practice in College Admission

This framework was developed by practitioners on the Centering Students in Equitable Admission Practices Committee.

