



Finding a Place to Thrive

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice
Considerations in the College Search Process



By Shanell Leggins

Building a college list has never been just about an institution's academic merits. An array of other factors—including location, size, and cost—must be considered. And new research highlights the importance of further expanding that list to include a college's track record related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

Recent data published by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) found that campus community impacts student success by 44 percent. Students are more likely to thrive when they have access to people who understand and relate to them and when they can gain support from programs that value their culture and ideology. Including such factors in the college search process is imperative, and counselors play a critical role in guiding students and families as they weigh these important considerations.

FACTORS FOR STUDENTS TO CONSIDER

Counselors can tell students to research and gather information, but prospective applicants need to have a clear vision of what to look for when making the determination if diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is valued at a particular school.

In 2021, almost every school has a mission statement that involves DEI and has multiple pictures plastered over their website that illustrate a diverse student body. To truly dive deep, students must look past the rhetoric and ask for data examining the success of BIPOC students, such as graduation rates. Data that shows faculty diversity, or lack thereof, can also be a strong indicator of a college's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In school districts and universities



alike, faculty representation often reflects the student body and can also influence pedagogy and curriculum.

Stacy Richardson, director of college counseling at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School in Washington DC, advises her students to look closely at what's available at each school on their list. "Is there a thriving community of students to whom you can relate? Do they have student organizations and administrative offices in place to support diverse students? Do they have a chief diversity officer? What are the issues students are passionate about? What is being said in the student newspaper and the local newspaper? What is the area that surrounds the campus like- are there places for you to explore and feel comfortable (restaurants, shops, etc.)? Can you be yourself and not worry about your safety?" Richardson said she asks her students. She also advises students to research whether there have been hate

crimes on campus, and if so, the repercussions and resolutions.

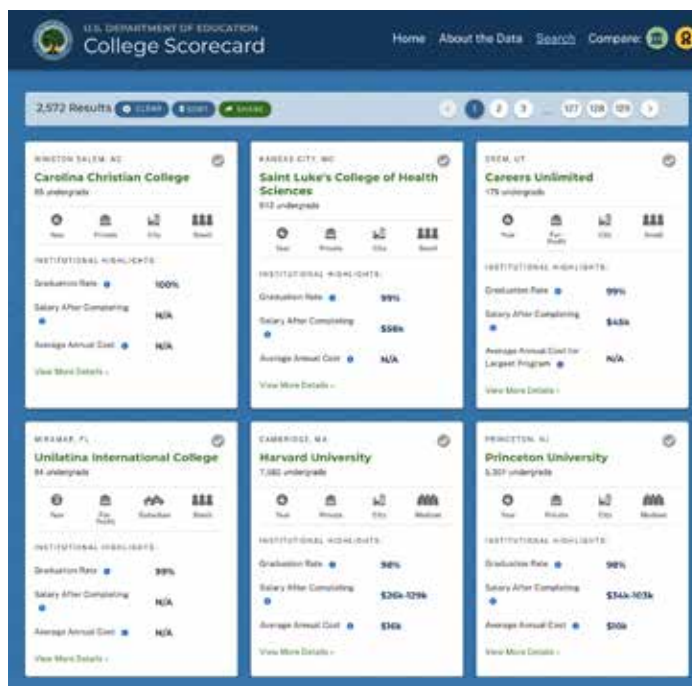
In a recent issue of its quarterly publication, the *Rostrum*, the ASCCC outlined other factors to look for when researching colleges. Considerations include equity-minded organizations that BIPOC students can connect with, testimonials shared by current or former underrepresented students; scholarships and grants available for underrepresented students; and the presence of celebratory events for students on campus and online at the end of each academic semester. Less obvious aspects to inquire about are whether faculty and staff attend trainings focused on how to foster inclusivity on campus; whether there is a mentor program for immigrant, international, and refugee students; whether marketing materials are in multiple languages; whether the school has software that helps faculty learn to pronounce students' names correctly; and whether career planning workshops are offered in other languages.

Having students and families speak directly with recent alumni who graduated from their high school can help applicants gain honest responses and a clear understanding of the type of support they will have access to, said Jamie Kim, director of college counseling at St. John's School in Houston, Texas. According to Kim, "In some cases, our students are more vulnerable with those they know, so they tend to ask more candid questions with regard to financial support or expectations within that community, their transition from a PWI space like ours to the college they're considering, and the experiences and interactions both inside and outside the classroom."

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Student newspapers can be another valuable source of information, especially the editorial or opinion columns. These often serve as a true testament of the tone and attitude of the student body, and typically the school's inclusivity will shine through based on what people are writing.

Watching news coverage from the cities and towns surrounding campus can also be extremely beneficial, as is researching student outcomes. The US Department of Education's [College Scorecard](#)



allows students to look at multiple aspects of a college's financial data including student loan debt, starting salaries for alumni from a particular school, graduation rate, and costs.

"Students have to understand that financial aid and upward mobility are also diversity and inclusion issues," said Danny Tejada, a lead college counselor with We Go to College, LLC in St. Louis, Missouri.

ACKNOWLEDGING ISSUES AND EMBRACING TRANSPARENCY

After guiding students through the research process, what should counselors do when schools aren't doing well in DEI? Glossing over the truth or sharing only part of

the story isn't an option. Oftentimes counselors are a student's only source of guidance in the college search process. Therefore, it is essential to be as upfront as possible and to give students the best information with which to make a decision. It is undeniably clear that school counselors have a large, if not the largest, impact on students and their postsecondary careers, so it is imperative to be truthful and have authentic and meaningful conversations surrounding DEI on college campuses.

Underrepresented groups are faced with overt racism and discriminatory behavior more frequently than not, and it is up to universities to ensure that all students feel safe and are supported consistently and appropriately. Although it is unacceptable for hate crimes, discrimination, and implicit bias to be present on a campus, it does happen, and it is the counselor's responsibility to explain and discuss the realities of these occurrences on certain campuses. Tejada emphasized, "...choosing between possible upward mobility and keeping their dignity. For many students that I have worked with in my past, it really meant the difference between life and death. As a first-generation, low-income student, person of color myself, I knew that feeling all too well." According to Tejada, it is critical for counselors to be upfront, so students have the chance to be successful in an appropriate environment.

If a particular college is known for racist ideology, or for not being inclusive, a student who values diversity should be warned and



pointed in a different direction. Certain colleges embrace DEI and devote ample time and effort into ensuring that all students have the same opportunities, and numerous studies show those efforts influence graduation rates among BIPOC groups.

Some schools have large discrepancies between white students and BIPOC students in terms of graduation rates, while others are equal. Counselors should use these facts and statistics to help guide their students. However, Kim noted that there's much more to DEI work and finding students a place where they feel supported. "There's a difference between admitting a diverse class and supporting a diverse class, so it's important that students understand what it means to be supported. It's important that as college counselors, we

help our students understand what support looks and feels like to them. Sometimes, our students haven't received support and just navigated through it by sheer will and determination that they may not know what they can actually look and ask for," she said. It's up to counselors to guide students to schools that will support them, and to show students what authentic support looks like.

ACTIONS COUNSELORS AND COLLEGES CAN TAKE

Once a student finds a perfect match, or in other words, a college that exceeds their expectations for academics and inclusion, it's important to recognize how the college conveys its mission to the surrounding area and to future prospective students. There needs to be "buy-in" throughout the entire

institution; all faculty members and students need to be working toward the same goals or else the structure will crumble.

When colleges were first created, they were meant for middle- and upper-class white males, therefore, being aware of DEI and increasing DEI on campuses and the surrounding areas is critical. Colleges need to be student-ready instead of students being college-ready.

Richardson said colleges should ensure their DEI mission statements and philosophies are consistent and constant. "Educating students is the best way to do this. It must be embedded in the curriculum that every student is required to take. Counselors and prospective students need to see a diverse administration and faculty who are committed to

fostering a community that values every voice and civil discourse. Counselors receive so many emails from colleges, it would be nice to receive messages about their diversity initiatives on an ongoing basis,” she said.

Schools can talk about being diverse and equal, but until they actually make an effort, their rhetoric is meaningless. A college can show it is committed to fostering cultural connections by working with current and prospective students, surrounding high schools, community outreach programs, and various local cultural communities. Communicating with the above groups can give schools insight on what to improve, how to improve, and what is working. Visiting high schools and describing the college experience gets students interested and holds colleges accountable for their actions. When students and colleges have a reciprocal relationship, everyone benefits.

pandemic, numerous colleges became test-optional, but pushing colleges to become test-blind institutions is ideal. Test prep courses, review books, and tutors all increase standardized test scores, but they also cost money. BIPOC students are more likely to come from low-socioeconomic households, many of which can't afford these resources. There is much more to a student than a test score. Once abolished, equity becomes more balanced.

Equal access to college information and recruitment is also crucial. Historically, colleges have done a poor job with Black student enrollment, a troubling trend that continues today, said Tejada, the counselor with We Go to College. He recalls that few colleges planned recruitment visits to the diverse South Bronx high school where he worked a couple years ago. True access is impossible to reach when colleges fail to deliberately put themselves in front of Black students and their families, he said.

pair prospective applicants with current students of all ethnicities and races, and create administrative positions strictly focused on DEI.

Tejada said colleges can and should do this in many ways. “Building partnerships with CBOs, public schools, and public school systems are critical to any school’s DEI mission. They have to do the outreach. They have to do things such as create focused plans to visit CBOs and public schools in an area they’ve never been before. They have to invite CBO and public school college counselors to attend counselor events and trips to their school,” he said.

Making assumptions about the students is a poor strategy, continued Tejada. “Colleges need to stop settling on the idea that the Black students who fit their profile don’t exist because that isn’t true. The real issue is that Black students and their counselors don’t know you exist. Information is king. You don’t know what you don’t know,” he said. Colleges need to meet students where they are.

Once a campus gains a positive reputation for inclusivity, it must ensure the surrounding area follows suit. Working with the city or town, chamber of commerce, and local officials would help immensely. Students and their families are attracted to safe areas where students can explore, shop, go out to eat, and establish a future career. It is the responsibility of the college to ensure that life on and off campus provides students with a welcoming, diverse, and safe community. 📍

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Shanell Leggins, Ed.D., is a college counselor at NIST International School (Thailand).

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Something else that would benefit those involved in the admission process is for colleges to hold professional development conferences with school counselors. In addition, colleges can extend their DEI values by permanently getting rid of mandatory standardized test scores, a paramount aspect of the college admission process that negatively affects underrepresented groups. During the COVID-19

It isn't realistic to assume that BIPOC students or their family members will feel comfortable reaching out to a college or putting themselves on a college campus they are unfamiliar with. Colleges need to lead the way by creating inviting situations, such as multicultural nights. They need to send out personal invitations to high school students, develop mentor programs that