

INTERSECTIONS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS

There is no doubt that 2020 has put a number of professions through their paces—college admission and recruitment included. The longer it takes to secure widespread COVID relief, the worse our economic situation becomes. These challenges are broad, sweeping, and beyond the scope of one institution’s individual strategies. We have a long hard road ahead of us. That daunting prospect can leave the individual admission professional disheartened and burned-out. That said, one framework has shown up time and time again to offer clarity.

By Megan Grady, Torri Henson, and Brittney Jackson



INTERSECTIONALITY AND ADMISSION

Intersectionality: An intellectual framework championed by Black, queer, and Latinx feminist scholars in the 1970s, and popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in a 1991 law article, claims that identities like race, gender, and class can't be examined in isolation. They must be considered as reinforcing stressors that compound the level of oppressing forces an individual might navigate.

How do we apply intersectionality to the college admission process? A partnership between the National Association for College Admission Counseling and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators was announced in early November. The strategies that emerge from this collaboration could help to address the growing financial challenges to college enrollment, as well as the increasing demands for an equitable and antiracist admission process. In a recent interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about the new partnership, NACAC CEO Angel B. Pérez was quoted as saying, "We can't be having these conversations in silos."

So why are we? We invite you to think about the silos themselves and how they inform our work, rather than structure it. That is where we find ourselves: three admission counselors, tasked with the recruitment and support of three populations with very different needs—and three distinct silos. With so many thinkers and administrators from across our industry coming together, we are hoping to offer a specific, and rather vulnerable, anecdote to the larger conversation.

Changes in the national landscape will necessarily change the way in which we recruit.

As the prospective student population decreases and colleges compete ever more strenuously to fill their seats, admission professionals must expect their roles to evolve. Gone are the days of gatekeeping; instead, we must function as both counselor and concierge, educating and eliminating barriers for those who have been traditionally underserved, while facilitating a smooth enrollment process for those students in high demand, such as musicians, athletes, and international students.

Of course, admission offices across the nation have long appointed counselors to work with these special populations. Our ranks are filled with transfer admission counselors, recruitment coordinators for the visual and performing arts, multicultural admission counselors, international counselors, athletic liaisons, and more. And to the extent that students remain neatly in their specified lanes, this siloed model works; after all, who is better to guide a musician through the stressful application and audition process than a music recruiter? Having a

knowledgeable and reliable contact for program information, application deadlines, and audition requirements is an excellent resource for a prospective music student.

But what if that musician also happens to be a transfer student who is faced with conflicting application requirements and deadlines? What if that prospective transfer is also a first-generation student who has not received sufficient counseling to navigate a circuitous route through higher education? What if that first-generation student is also a recruited athlete who needs help understanding NCAA guidelines?



admission review may give the student unrealistic expectations for their admission outcome or financial aid award. When admission abdicates its role in educating and guiding applicants through the process, the students suffer.

Allowing students to be pigeonholed by aspects of their identity creates problems well beyond skewed expectations. Colleges must provide information relevant to the student and necessary for their understanding of the institution and admission process. But reducing students to a series of discrete identities fails to acknowledge their desire for the full college experience. For transfer students and those from traditionally marginalized populations, it can create an even more pernicious effect, creating a sense that they will forever be marked by their application status—always seen as “less than” and never a true member of the campus community.

Not only do students who fall into special populations face a multitude of challenges through the application process, but their equivalent admission professionals do as well. These special population students do not live solely in their applications and acceptance letters, but are often in a counselor’s inbox or Zoom room weekly with new questions. They require more nuanced and focused attention, requiring the counselor to be a guide through the entire admission process, not just their specific area.

they’re shunted from counselor to counselor—even as their inboxes fill up with targeted correspondence from each office. Repeatedly introducing and explaining oneself to a succession of staff members is annoying at best, but it can be truly disaffecting and demoralizing for those who already feel like outsiders to the process.

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For intersectional students such as these, the road to college can be particularly daunting. Not only are the problems more complex, but in the absence of a clear point of contact, they are often unsure to whom they should even direct their questions. They risk slipping through the cracks as

In the absence of clear messaging and coordinated information from the admission office, many of these students simply give up. Others, especially recruited students such as artists and athletes, may seek guidance elsewhere on campus. While coaches and faculty may be excellent judges of talent, their lack of experience with holistic

This places a different kind of pressure on specialized counselors, who must not only provide students with general institutional information, but also educate them about the overarching admission process and identify how their individual talents or identities will impact their experience with the institution. By the very nature of their role, special population counselors must often focus more on determining the right fit for the student than selling their specific institution, and as such, they are more likely than others to have to share hard truths with students and their families. Those difficult conversations about financing the education, academic or program preparedness, and general institutional fit can be emotionally wrenching for counselor and student alike.

Juggling a large caseload of high-attention applicants and their support networks (families, counselors, other advocates) can feel overwhelming. That stress is often exacerbated both by institutional pressures and feelings of isolation from the rest of the admission team. Colleagues may not be aware of the additional enrollment demands placed on special populations or understand the single-minded focus that is sometimes required to meet them. Without the proper background information, they may push back on requests for project work that goes beyond the “norm” or grow to resent the constant pleas for inclusion by special population counselors. What may feel like nagging is often intended as advocacy.

Each of us struggled with these challenges in our own way while serving in our respective roles as music recruitment coordinator, multicultural admission coordinator, and



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transfer admission coordinator. As we began communicating about our intersectional students, we discovered a number of commonalities, both in our work and in the challenges that we routinely faced. Our supervisor suggested we form a working group specifically for special population counselors, and with that, #specialpops was born. We began holding regularly

scheduled meetings to discuss intersectional students and to ensure we were serving them as a cohesive team.

Beyond the obvious benefit of coordinating our work with specific students, the meetings also gave us the space to pool our knowledge and discuss more broadly the challenges of working with higher-touch applicant groups. Those conversations allowed each



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of us to develop a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to our work, both individually and as a collective, which in turn helped us better navigate our roles within the larger framework of the admission office.

Getting buy-in from our colleagues was crucial, not just to our professional identities, but to the way our students were (and are) seen as applicants. Identifying and assisting those students at their

particular intersections—whatever they may be—requires the work of an admission team that recognizes, understands, celebrates, and supports individual needs throughout the process. With our united advocacy and intentional communication, we were able to reframe the lens through which our applicants were seen. This work takes thoughtful, incremental change and is not a short-term project. As much as we might like

it to be so, we've yet to build a foolproof system or create a perfect method of coordination. But we have made progress.

With support from admission leadership, special population counselors were added to the weekly staff meeting agenda, an act that not only served to highlight the importance of our groups to the overall recruitment process, but also helped remove the aura of mystery from our work. Our respective applicant populations were further integrated into the broader office mission when we each began conducting specialty training sessions for the entire admission team, including the student employees in our campus visit program. This training has helped to ensure that special population applicants feel welcomed and valued throughout their experience with our office, from first contact with a counselor or tour guide all the way through to deposit and beyond.

The communications and data teams also became crucial allies in our effort to create a cohesive admission experience for special population and intersectional

applicants. Providing each student with the appropriate messaging and information to navigate their specific admission process is critical, but so too is ensuring that they don't feel pigeonholed by their application status. Being a "special population" applicant should not define or constrain an individual's identity as a student, so it is important to ensure each student receives the full gamut of information about life on campus, in addition to the program-specific information needed to apply.

Clear communications and intentional collaboration, both within our trio and within the admission office at large, have come together to inform the #specialpops strategy. Ultimately, this has allowed us to be better partners and facilitate a deeper understanding of our students across the entire team.

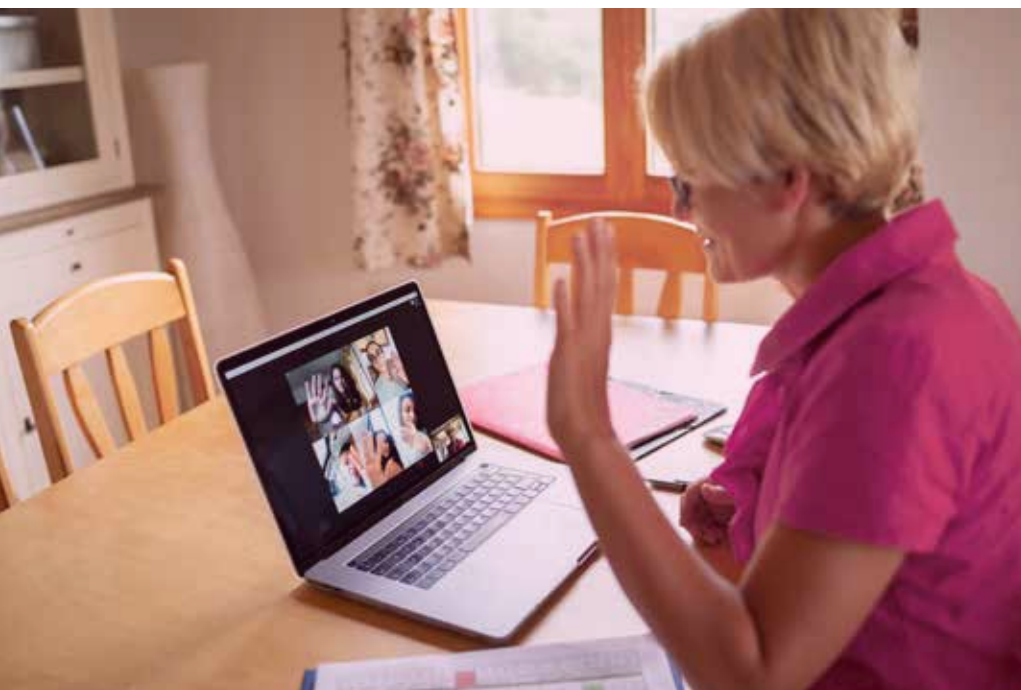
article, one of us made several references to "FTIC applicants" before being gently reminded of transfer students present in the applicant pool. That telltale Freudian slip speaks to the amount of intentional work that still needs to happen. Our profession often favors solutions that are concrete and quantifiable. That framework not only shapes our understanding of the students we serve, but also each other. We have been taught to see ourselves as enrollment managers, class "shapers," and gatekeepers. Incorporating intersectionality into recruitment practices means taking a critical eye to the competitive energy that fuels our profession.

We are proposing a shift in perspective. Instead of seeing ourselves as separate from the special populations we serve, we

career. For a brief moment in time, we meet that student when the relationship with their high school counselor, registrar, or employer is transitioning, but their connection to student affairs staff has not yet begun. We are an intersectional profession. Liaison and recruiter. Educator and gatekeeper.

To not acknowledge that duality in our profession means we risk missing out on intentional and impactful solutions that can bring us that much closer to the seamless admission experience we're hoping to provide. Or more to the point, as writer and activist Audre Lorde said, "Only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable." 📌

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Successes and strategies aside, integration isn't easy.

Even as the three of us came together in preparation for this

need to see ourselves as more like them. Intersectional. We stand at an important crossroad in a student's educational