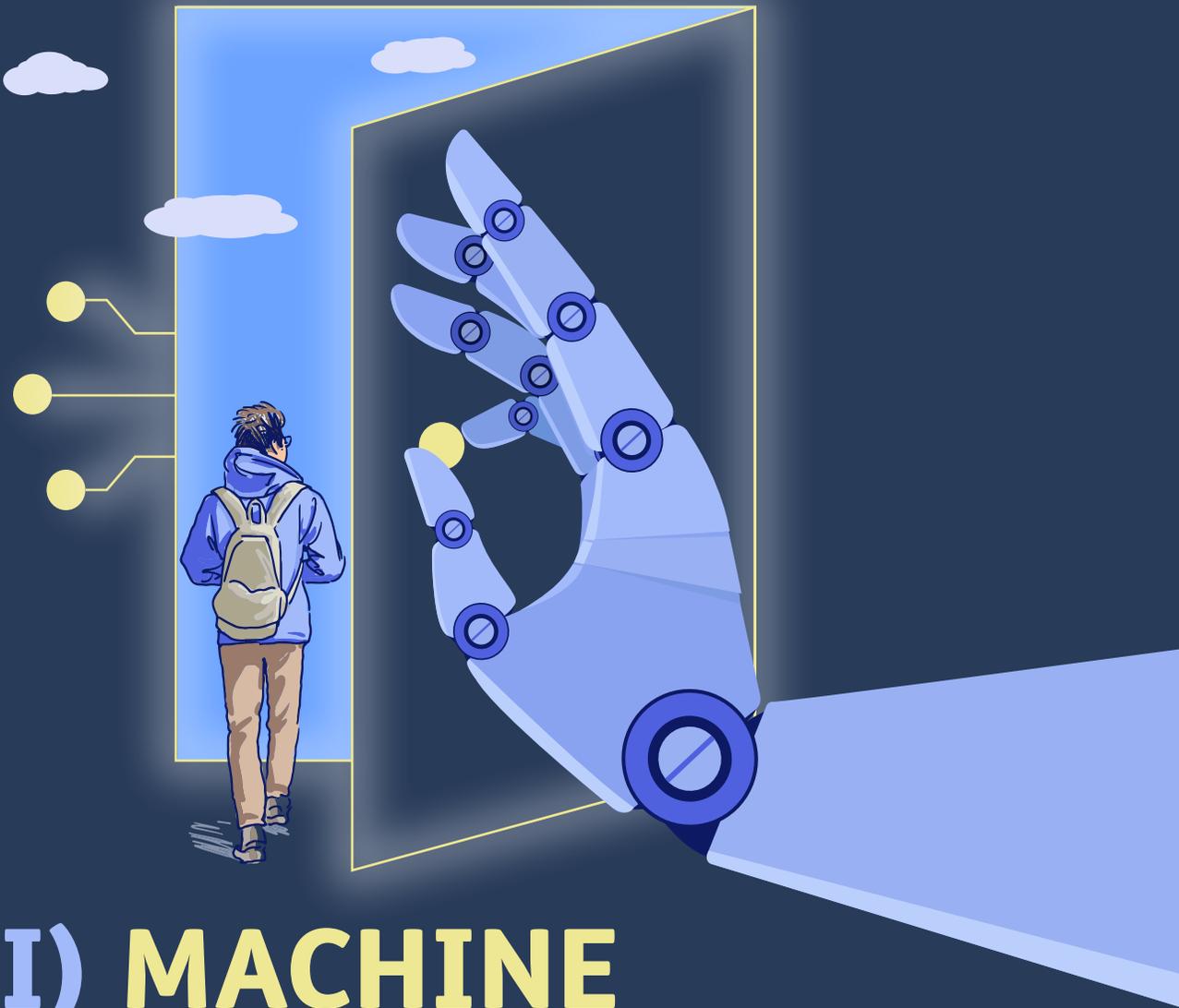


The Journal of
COLLEGE ADMISSION

WINTER 2026 • NUMBER 269



A(I) MACHINE IN THE PROCESS

When it comes to artificial intelligence, there's no 'right' way to use it. But AI is changing how both students and counselors approach college admission — whether you're ready or not. | 18



Board service gives me the opportunity to have a far-reaching impact on our profession by helping to ensure NACAC remains the leading, loyal, and trust-worthy organization for our work.

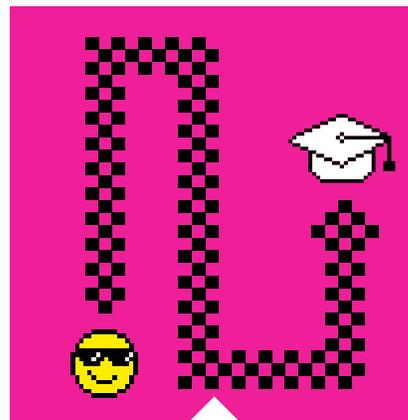
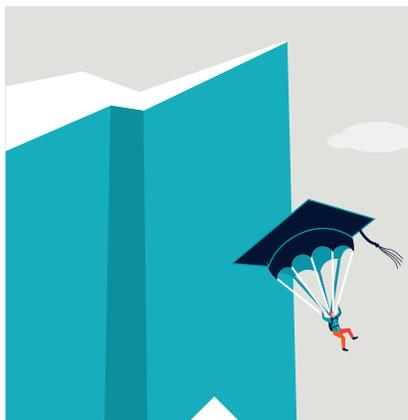
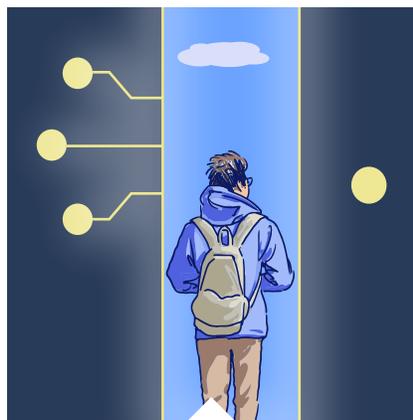
Tahirah Jordan Crawford
2025-26 Chair-elect



CALL FOR
CANDIDATES

CONTENTS | *The Journal of* COLLEGE ADMISSION

WINTER 2026 • NUMBER 269



18

A(I) MACHINE IN THE PROCESS By Laura J. Cole

When it comes to artificial intelligence, there's no 'right' way to use it. But AI is changing how both students and counselors approach college admission — whether you're ready or not.

24

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CLIFF IS HERE By Jim Paterson

A drop in new high school graduates is expected to begin this year, marking the start of the anticipated demographic cliff.

30

GAME ON By Melissa Brock

The explosive rise of esports is shaking up traditional student-athlete recruitment. Millions of students annually engage in esports — some so competitively that it influences their college choice. Here's how colleges and universities are responding to the interests of this growing market of students.

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

4 INSPIRE

Meet the Moment in College Admission Counseling and NACAC Leadership

By Derek Jay DuBose

6 MEET

Chris Rodriguez
Erin West Earle

8 SERVE

A Village of Student Success
By Kenya McCullum

PROFESSIONAL TRENDS

14 ADVOCACY

Moving Forward: Our Advocacy Philosophy in the New Year

By Sean Robins

16 LEARN

Help Your Student Make the Most of Working in a Lab

By Bob Malkin

10 ADVICE

How I... identify and promote the unique value of my institution

EXTRA CREDIT

36 INSIDE NACAC

Happenings at Headquarters

40 VIEWPOINT

College Admission is not 'Zero-Sum'

By David Hawkins

42 UPLIFT

You Aren't Lost. You're Being Led Somewhere New

By Kate Trott

38 IMAGINE

What if... higher education was considered a public good?

NACAC
Conference 2026



SAVE THE DATE

October 8 – 10, 2026

**Minneapolis Convention Center
Minneapolis, MN**

NACAC STAFF

ANGEL B. PÉREZ, PH.D.

Chief Executive Officer

ASHLEY M. PERZYNA

Chief Operating Officer

RACHEL WILLIAMS

Assistant Director, Communications
& Media Relations

SAWSAN CHALABI

Assistant Director, Art & Design

The Journal of College Admission
Number 269/Winter 2026 was
published with the help of NACAC
contributors.

MARY STEGMEIR

Contributing Editor

UNLABELED STOCK ART & PHOTOS

Adobe Stock, Bigstock, iStock, Unsplash

Copyright © 2026 National Association
for College Admission Counseling. All
rights reserved. Material published in
The Journal of College Admission is
neither endorsed by nor official policy
of the National Association for College
Admission Counseling.

NACAC NONDISCRIMINATION STATEMENT

The National Association for College
Admission Counseling adheres to a policy
of nondiscrimination in all of its activities,
programs, and practices, and pledges
to treat people equally without concern
for age, gender, race, creed, disabling
conditions, national origin, sex, sexual
orientation, gender identity, or political
affiliation.

NACAC 2025–2026 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

DEREK DUBOSE

Board Chair
Director of College & Academic Counseling
Miami Country Day School (FL)

TAHIRAH JORDAN CRAWFORD

Chair-Elect
Director of Multicultural Recruitment
Columbia University (NY)

PHIL MORENO

Immediate Past Board Chair
Associate Director of College Counseling
The Nueva School

KEN ANSELMANT

Trustee
Senior Director for Enrollment Strategy,
Human Capital Education

SHIRLEY M. COLLADO, PH.D.

Trustee
President and CEO, College Track

NOLVIA DELGADO

Trustee
Executive Director, The Kaplan Education Foundation

JONATHAN FERRELL

Trustee
Director of College Counseling
Pace Academy (GA)

KRISTEN HARRIS

Trustee
Executive Director of College and Career Planning
in the Office of Student Pathways,
New York City Public Schools

AMY HUTTON

Trustee
Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management
University of Colorado Boulder

JOHNNIE JOHNSON

Trustee
Vice President for Enrollment
Washington College (MD)

SEAN OHIRA

Trustee
Independent Educational Consultant
Kuleana College Planning (HI)

MEGAN O'ROURKE

Trustee
Associate Dean/Coordinator of Midwest Recruitment
Providence College (RI)

MYRONEE SIMPSON

Trustee
Director of College Counseling,
Shorecrest Preparatory School (FL)

RANDY STAMM

Trustee
Affiliate Presidents Council Coordinator
School Counselor, Hackensack High School (NJ)

KASEY URQUÍDEZ

Trustee
Retired Vice President, Enrollment Management & Dean,
Undergraduate Admissions, University of Arizona

DONNELL WIGGINS

Trustee
Associate Vice President for Strategic Enrollment
Management & Dean of Admission,
University of Dayton (OH)

ANGEL B. PÉREZ, PH.D.

Ex Officio
Chief Executive Officer, NACAC (VA)

ADVERTISING DISCLAIMER

The National Association for College
Admission Counseling does not explicitly
or implicitly endorse third parties in
exchange for advertising. Advertising does
not influence editorial content, products,
or services in any way.

ID STATEMENT

The Journal of College Admission (ISSN
0734-6670), established in 1956, is
published quarterly by the National
Association for College Admission
Counseling, 1050 N. Highland St, Ste.
400, Arlington, VA 22201-99914. Digital
subscriptions are US\$75.

Meet the Moment in College Admission Counseling and NACAC Leadership

A message from the NACAC board chair.

By Derek Jay DuBose

We are living in challenging times for our profession. The landscape of college admission and higher education is shifting rapidly; systems and structures are evolving; and the needs of students and families are more complex than ever. In moments like these, we have two choices: put our heads down or, as The Temptations famously sang, “Get Ready”!

Get ready to hold onto what makes the work we do in NACAC so special: our commitment to students, equity, access, and opportunity. And get ready to adapt to the realities that the world is presenting us. This is not a time for fear, but rather a time for courage, creativity, and collaboration.

Many years ago, I had the

opportunity to “get ready” and give my time and energy to meet the needs of our membership and our profession. I adapted to the times and the leadership that was needed. I found my lane in NACAC and had the privilege to lead several committees and a Special Interest Group, co-chair a national conference, and help identify and promote best practices in our profession as a NACAC board trustee.

That journey taught me something powerful: Leadership is not about waiting for the perfect moment; it’s about meeting the moment. It’s about raising your hand to ask tough questions, offering your talents, and being a voice for those who will come after you. I remember sitting at tables where few looked like me or shared my generational experiences. I decided to speak up,

not just for myself, but for the future of NACAC. Today, initiatives that were once considered radical are now commonplace. That’s progress. That’s the power of showing up.

Now, the call to serve our profession as a member of the NACAC Board of Trustees is available to you. I encourage you to consider this opportunity and put your name forward. It doesn’t matter where you come from; what matters is that our profession needs you. So, get ready!

Serving on the NACAC board has been one of the greatest professional development experiences of my life. The position is unique in that it allows those who hold it to leverage their full range of experiences in a way few other service opportunities do. As a NACAC board trustee, the tasks I’ve tackled have utilized my



Leaders don't wait for the perfect moment; they meet the moment. Apply to serve on the NACAC Board of Trustees and start forming the future today.

expertise serving campus communities, coaching in schools, and working on nonprofit boards at the local, state, and national levels. My time away from this profession in alumni development and philanthropy also gave me new insights into how we invest in ourselves as an organization, and I bring those perspectives to my current position as chair, helping me push for change and growth.

So, I invite you: Get ready to lead. Get ready to adapt. Get ready to meet this moment. NACAC needs your voice, your ideas, and your courage...not just for today, but for the future we are building together. We are... NACAC! 🇺🇸

Derek DuBose is chair of the NACAC Board of Trustees.

NACAC



BOARD OF TRUSTEES '26

CALL FOR CANDIDATES

APPLY BY:
FEB. 27 | 5 P.M. ET

[LEARN MORE](#)

Chris Rodriguez

Associate Director of College Counseling
The Lovett School (GA)



NACAC MEMBER SINCE 2012

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE WORLD OF COLLEGE ADMISSION COUNSELING?

The need to pay my rent! I had the (mis)fortune of finishing graduate school at the University of Georgia in the fall of 2009, which coincided with the recession and a bleak job market, especially for the nonprofit positions for which I'd been training. I began casting a wider net and fortunately was invited to interview for an admissions counselor position at Mercer University (GA). They believed, for some reason, that this quirky introvert would be ideally suited to talking to people for a living, and here I am still in the field 15-plus years later.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB?

Despite the cloud of bleakness hanging over our profession — one that seems to grow darker and more threatening every year — the one constant that keeps me returning to the office every morning is the opportunity to help students. No matter their background, every student has a story and the potential to grow in unexpected and magical ways during the college process. When students trust me to be this person, I treasure being their guide and teacher on this fraught path. There

is nothing better than seeing students transform along the way into confident, independent young adults ready to take on the world.

HOW HAS NACAC PLAYED A ROLE IN YOUR CAREER?

In the giant spiderweb that is the admissions multiverse, NACAC is the nexus point for everyone. On both the admissions and high school sides of the desk, NACAC has connected me with mentors, colleagues, and friends. Whether attending in-person conferences, watching educational webinars, or serving on ad hoc committees, I'm constantly learning and growing both personally and professionally within the organization.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING OUR PROFESSION TODAY?

Whenever we as an industry make tangible progress toward achieving true equity — relaxed testing policies, improved financial aid access, expansion of recruitment efforts into new territories and groups — the hydra of privilege reveals a new head with which to defend itself. Until everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, LGBTQ+ identity, gender identity, and every other aspect of background and core selfhood, can equally access

and benefit from higher education, we will have hard work to do.

WHEN YOU AREN'T WORKING, WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO?

I wear many masks, sometimes quite literally — I cosplay as 20-plus different characters at conventions, volunteer events, and on Instagram (@shortdudecosplay), most frequently as Captain America, Indiana Jones, and Daredevil. I also try to see as many movies in the theater as I can (around 50 a year) and I'm never without several stray books tucked into random pockets and bags.

WHAT FIVE WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

Goofy. Cinephile. Pragmatic. Metronomic. Skeptic. 🏳️‍🌈

Erin West Earle

Director of Undergraduate Enrollment,
New Student Transitions & Visitor Services
The University of Rhode Island



NACAC MEMBER SINCE 2009

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE WORLD OF COLLEGE ADMISSION COUNSELING?

Reflecting on my journey, I didn't initially envision myself in college admission counseling, but looking back, it's clear where I truly belong. A mentor during my college years nudged me to apply for a temporary recruitment role in the admission office. Their guidance led me to discover a career perfectly aligned with my public relations skills and passion for helping others.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB?

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my role is the opportunity to contribute to increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of higher education. I enjoy working on policies, procedures, and programs that help historically excluded populations reach higher education. I've embraced the chance to develop and implement an innovative model that extends beyond the traditional May 1 deadline in my role as the director of undergraduate enrollment, new student transitions, and visitor services. This initiative enables us to support students and their families as they transition to higher education. By overseeing the orientation and welcoming of new students, I can build upon the groundwork laid during the admission process, ensuring that students have the resources they need to thrive at our university.

HOW HAS NACAC PLAYED A ROLE IN YOUR CAREER?

Being actively engaged with NACAC and its affiliate, [NEACAC](#), has profoundly influenced my professional journey. Through NEACAC, I acquired invaluable supervision, budget management, event planning, and collaboration skills, which equipped me for higher-level responsibilities within my office. Moreover, the peer network offered unwavering support and guidance during critical junctures.

Participating in the NACAC [Affiliate Presidents Council](#) and as the Women in Admission [SIG](#) co-chair further enriched my understanding of college admission counseling beyond New England by collaborating with exceptional professionals nationwide.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING OUR PROFESSION TODAY?

The most pressing challenge confronting our profession today lies in the imperative to dismantle entrenched systems of structural exclusion within higher education. While we collectively recognize this challenge, addressing it is hindered by the weight of ensuring institutional financial success while also navigating political barriers. It will take intentional and ethical leaders to remain brave enough to move the needle on this issue.

Another significant challenge we encounter is the prevailing

perception that higher education is dispensable. One of the paramount challenges our profession and nation must confront is rectifying the undervaluation of higher education while also tackling the escalating costs of attending college.

WHEN YOU AREN'T WORKING, WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO?

Though my thoughts are often busy with my passion for our work, a few activities truly rejuvenate me. One of these is spending time at the beach, a space that never fails to invigorate and relax me. Additionally, I enjoy reading books. Typically, I have a variety of books on the go: one for leisure, one related to my work, and one in audiobook format.

I also get immense joy from experiencing the world anew through my children's eyes. Recently, I embarked on a train trip to Boston with my son and witnessing his excitement about the commuter rail served as a poignant reminder not to take life's simple pleasures for granted. Also, I am committed to serving my community. Most notably, I serve as the school board chair in my town.

WHAT FIVE WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

Adaptable. Innovative. Persistent. Problem-solver. Mentor. 🌈

A Village of Student Success

A Texas-based nonprofit nurtures student success by building a network that fosters achievement beyond college access.

By Kenya McCullum

It takes a village to raise a child. Texas-based college access organization **EMERGE** has taken that adage to heart by creating a village of people dedicated to putting first-generation and low-income students on the trajectory of lifelong success that benefits not just program participants, but their families and communities. The services EMERGE offers were specifically designed with this goal in mind, said CEO Ashley Cash.

“We encourage our team and community members to be a part of the village that surrounds these brilliant young people. It shows up in our model: We support students in a seven-year continuum from 10th grade through college graduation,” said Cash. “It’s really important that we carry that support and build that relationship over the long term, so we’re there for the college search, the application process, the transition to campus, the sophomore slump, the career exploration,” eventually culminating with a “walk across the graduation stage.”

Juan Venancio walked across the Harvard University (MA) graduation stage in 2024 with a bachelor’s degree in government. He went on to earn a master’s degree in global affairs from the Schwarzman Scholars program at Tsinghua University



Built on the belief that college success doesn’t end with acceptance, **EMERGE** surrounds first-generation and low-income students with a sustained network of counselors, parents, and mentors — supporting them from high school through graduation and beyond, and turning individual achievement into lasting community impact.



We support students in a seven-year continuum from 10th grade through college graduation — because it really takes a village.

Ashley Cash
CEO, EMERGE



in China. Venancio has since brought the knowledge he gained from his education back to Texas and is currently the pro bono and new projects coordinator at Texas Appleseed, a non-profit legal advocacy group in Austin. He also is the co-founder of Global Sino Institute, an independent, non-partisan think tank that conducts research to address global challenges.

“Juan’s story is so incredibly powerful,” said Cash. “He is a great

example of not just succeeding for himself, but really building a system to help others succeed.”

Venancio credits, in part, the EMERGE village for all that he has accomplished since his high school graduation from Sharpstown International School in Houston in 2019.

“I think that EMERGE is unique because it takes on the position of providing and serving as a foundational pillar for students to dream and to grow,” Venancio said. The program prepares students “to actually go to these top universities and succeed because...it really takes a village,” he added.

“You have an entire community supporting you from Houston,” Venancio said. “I’m very privileged and very blessed to have been a part of this because it really has catapulted me to (go) far.”

And of course, no village would be complete without the guidance of loving parents steering their children in the right direction. Venancio’s mother and father, immigrants from Mexico and Honduras, instilled the importance of higher education in him from a young age — inspiring him to take advantage of the opportunities that they never had.

This type of parental involvement is an important part of the EMERGE

village, and the organization offers specific programming to help parents understand the college application process, particularly the financial aid piece. EMERGE counselors make home visits to provide parents with additional support.

“We really bring parents along from Day One so that they’re part of this high school journey, and then obviously onto college,” said Cash. “We have to have family buy-in. We know that it matters on the front end, of course, so parents need to know that students are going to be participating in a workshop, maybe in the evening, or there are other activities we’ll be able to provide for them. But in addition to that, we know how critical the family voice is in where students go to college.”

Mentors are another critical part of the EMERGE village. These are professionals in the community, including some EMERGE alumni, who encourage students and show them what is possible with a college education. EMERGE mentors also give students access to their own networks, which can help open doors during and after college. Whether students are looking for internships or opportunities following graduation, mentors help make the connections they need to thrive — and position students to eventually give back to the village themselves.

“I think we really are leaning into this ethos that our model needs to be relational and not transactional,” Cash said. “We don’t just process students through an application pipeline; we really build a community around each of them through their time with us and beyond.” 🌟

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.

HOW I...

IDENTIFY AND PROMOTE THE UNIQUE VALUE OF MY INSTITUTION

Tips and insights from college admission
counseling professionals.



Having worked at six different institutions, I've learned that much of what we perceive as unique tends to exist elsewhere, too. Unless uniqueness is the explicit goal, striving too hard to stand out can lead to a narrow focus, or worse, come across as superficial or gimmicky. Instead, focusing on your institution's core strengths often results in a more compelling and sustainable value proposition than trying to emphasize attributes you assume are exclusive. By highlighting proven qualities and areas of excellence, you build credibility and lasting impact for your brand. And if your area of excellence happens to be unique, consider that a welcome bonus!

Falone J. Serna
Dean of Undergraduate Admission and Outreach
California Lutheran University



As a former educator, I know the power of stories. I am grateful to be the keeper and the sharer of so many incredible College of Wooster stories. When I meet a student, family, or counselor and they ask questions, I reply with facts and data, but I always try to add a story about a Wooster student, current or graduated, that makes my answer both authentic and memorable. I am fortunate to have the time to get to know the people behind all of these Wooster stories. My advice: Learn as many of your institution's stories as you can!

April Gamble
Associate Director and Coordinator of Counselor Initiatives
The College of Wooster (OH)



Show, don't tell! After 300 college tours, it's the shared experiences related to programming that stick with me. I clearly remember drinking coffee from a project where students at Lycoming College (PA) applied principles of social responsibility and sustainability to enhance coffee farming in the Dominican Republic. I also remember having the chance to band and release migratory birds in a grassland habitat at Washington College (MD) and working in a lab to formulate a personalized lip balm at the only cosmetic pharmacy program in the country at the University of Toledo (OH). At all those schools, I left with a strong sense of not just what they offer, but how and why it is part of the learning.

Jodi Rosenshein Atkin
Independent College Admissions Consultant
Jodi Rosenshein Atkin, MA LLC



 To identify and promote the unique value of my institution, I focus on three core practices: understanding perspective, being honest, and emphasizing specifics. I begin by identifying what individual students and families actually value, recognizing that their perspectives often differ from what internal stakeholders consider distinctive. I then communicate our strengths truthfully, avoiding the temptation to present the institution as all things to all people — an approach that builds both personal and institutional credibility. Finally, rather than relying on broad claims of excellence, I highlight concrete examples, stories, and program details that illustrate how our offerings genuinely stand out.

David Burge
Vice President for Enrollment Management
George Mason University (VA)



 At the University of Minnesota, we explicitly decouple affordability and value. Affordability is dollars and time: things like a transparent net price, predictable aid, and four-year pathways. Value is what the student receives for those dollars. We lead with clarity on cost, then prove our value with evidence: undergraduate research at scale, local internships at 17 Fortune 500 companies, and career outcomes that support today's workforce needs. An affordable education makes college a reality, but value is what makes college worthwhile.

Gregory Sneed
Vice Provost for Enrollment Management
University of Minnesota



 I promote and identify the unique value of Hofstra University to counselors by showcasing what sets us apart and equipping them with the information they need to guide their students. I highlight our vibrant suburban campus just 25 miles from New York City, giving students unmatched access to internships, networking, and career opportunities. I emphasize our 175-plus majors, nationally recognized programs, and hands-on learning experiences that prepare students for success. Through webinars, campus visits, counselor fly-ins, and personalized outreach, I build strong partnerships with counselors, ensuring they understand Hofstra's distinct advantages, dynamic community, and exceptional student outcomes.

Bryan Rothstein
Director of External Relations, Office of Undergraduate Admission
Hofstra University (NY)



National College Fairs

NACAC 2026 SPRING In-Person & Virtual College Fairs

25

**COLLEGE FAIRS
THIS SPRING!**

675K+

**STUDENTS REACHED
PER YEAR**

1800+

**COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES**



LEARN MORE!

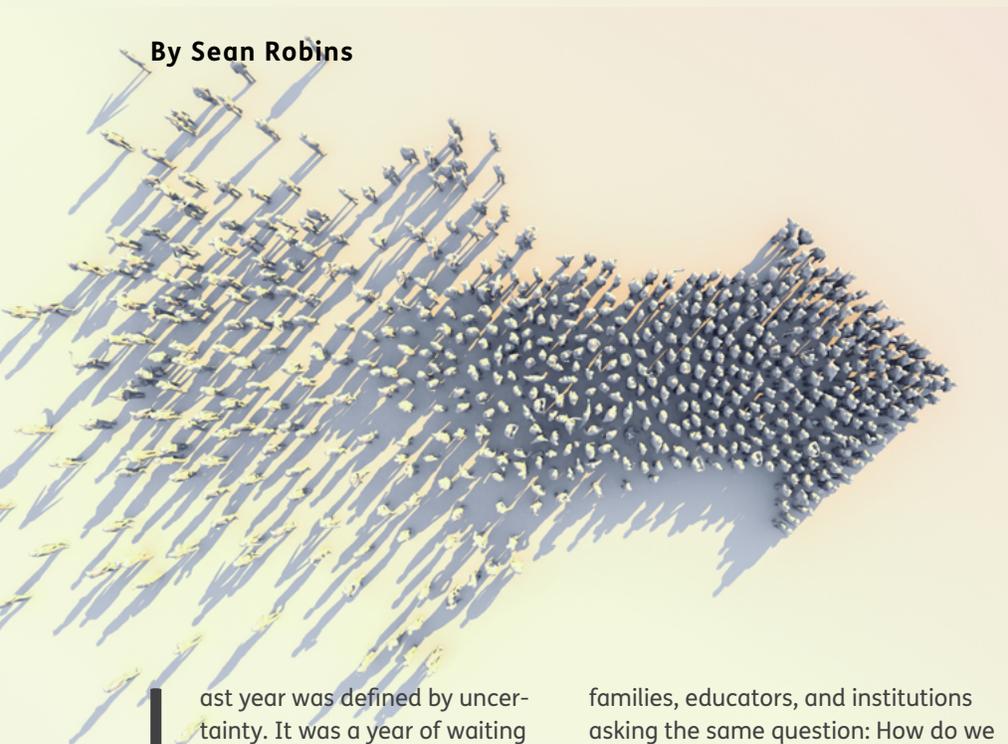
nacacnet.org/nacac-college-fairs



Moving Forward: Our Advocacy Philosophy in the New Year

We faced unprecedented challenges and changes last year. In 2026, NACAC is focusing its advocacy efforts on how we move forward together.

By Sean Robins



Last year was defined by uncertainty. It was a year of waiting for the next budget cut, the next policy reversal, or the next attempt to dismantle the structures that support students' access to education. Over the past 12 months, federal actions have frozen and canceled key programs; restricted pathways for international and undocumented students; undermined proven college access initiatives; and escalated an aggressive campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion. Collectively, these moves have left students,

families, educators, and institutions asking the same question: How do we move forward?

Now in a new year, that's what we at NACAC are doing: moving forward, and with your help.

YOUR STORIES STRENGTHEN OUR ADVOCACY

Last year, we asked you to share your stories and highlight how actions at the federal level were impacting your work. In 2026, we ask you to do the same — to [please continue sharing your boots-on-the-ground](#)

[perspective](#) about how federal policies are impacting you and your students.

Your stories have been instrumental. They were central to [NACAC's public comment](#) on the Department of Education's proposed ACTS expansion of IPEDS, where we urged the agency to reduce unnecessary reporting burdens, clarify expectations for institutions, and ensure that data collection does not unintentionally misrepresent the communities we serve. Colleges and universities are facing unprecedented strain, and your lived experiences gave clarity and urgency to those recommendations.

Your voices also were critical during the reconciliation negotiations that ultimately produced H.R.1, also known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. While the final law is deeply concerning, it is important to recognize that it could have been far worse. Thanks to sustained advocacy from NACAC, our members, and our partners across higher education, several harmful provisions were kept out. In a year marked by instability, your stories made a measurable difference in shaping the final outcome.

Every meeting on Capitol Hill, every letter submitted, and every briefing delivered was strengthened by your stories. They helped us illustrate how federal actions ripple into classrooms, counseling offices, and campus environments — where policies are no longer abstract ideas, but real obstacles faced by real students.

Your stories are the backbone of NACAC's advocacy. They ensure that our priorities remain anchored in the daily realities of those working closest to students.

WHY YOUR VOICE MATTERS IN OUR WORK AHEAD

We are facing a turbulent year ahead. While education decisions are made at the state and local levels, the federal government plays a critical role in ensuring students — especially those historically underserved — have a pathway to opportunity. That stability has been shaken, as the Trump administration seeks to move core Department of Education programs to other federal agencies. States are reevaluating their own budgets out of concern that the federal government will not continue to fund essential programs. Institutions are navigating a demographic enrollment cliff while facing restrictive policies that make it harder for students to access, afford, and complete higher education.

As this administration upends the Department of Education, NACAC is geared up to fight and advocate for its preservation.

- NACAC is leading a coordinated national advocacy strategy, including our upcoming National Advocacy Day in March, where members from across the country meet with lawmakers to share how federal decisions affect students and college admission counseling professionals. Through this coordinated effort — elevating your stories,

THEMES THAT GUIDE OUR ADVOCACY



These themes emerged from our spring 2025 NACAC member survey about impacts of recent federal actions. Members cited concerns regarding:

- **Uncertainty for international students**
- **Access to education for undocumented and mixed-status families**
- **Confusion around FAFSA and financial aid**
- **Maintenance of federal programs that increase access to education**
- **Preservation of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and policies**

aligning messages, and engaging members of Congress face-to-face — we ensure policymakers understand the real consequences of dismantling or dispersing core federal education functions.

- NACAC is calling on Congress to fully investigate the legal, operational, and equity implications of shifting programs out of the Department of Education. We are urging committees to halt transfers that threaten student access, disrupt financial aid delivery, or undermine civil rights protections, and to preserve the department's essential role in safeguarding opportunity.
- We are combining national survey findings with stories from our members to show how destabilizing policy proposals are affecting students, institutions, and counseling offices. By grounding our advocacy in evidence, NACAC is making clear why a strong, fully functioning Department of Education is indispensable to a fair and accessible system of higher education.

This moment in our history demands advocacy rooted in lived experience. Policymakers debate ideas, but it is stories — your stories — that illuminate what data alone cannot. They show the human impact of federal decisions in a way that resonates, reframes, and often reshapes understanding.

As we enter another unpredictable year that is poised to reshape the educational landscape, I encourage you to continue speaking up. Share what you are seeing. [Tell us how policies are affecting your students](#). Advocacy is not a one-time action; it is collective, sustained, and grounded in the real experiences of the people we serve.

Your voice is not only powerful — it is essential. Through all the noise, your stories are a lighthouse that guides our advocacy toward a more stable, student-centered future. They remind us that even in the most challenging moments, we move forward by elevating our stories — together. 🌊

Sean Robins is the director of advocacy at NACAC.

Help Your Student Make the Most of Working in a Lab

If your student is fortunate enough to land a university research position while in high school, follow these steps to help them jumpstart their college career.

By Bob Malkin

High school students seek out academic research positions because they are passionate about the subject, curious about the research profession, or want to improve their college application. No matter their motivation, students often fall short of taking full advantage of working at a university.

● Here's advice you can give them to maximize this opportunity.

1

PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATION

The biggest benefit of landing a lab job is the opportunity to publish or present research at a conference. Students should ideally discuss the potential of this opportunity prior to accepting the lab job, but if they didn't, they should make clear with the principal investigator (PI) of the lab that they are interested in publishing or presenting.

2

NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

A university is a wonderful environment full of interesting people, including visiting faculty. Advise your student to attend as many talks as they can given by visiting faculty, especially those from the universities they are interested in attending. This is a great way to learn more about the field. In addition, it's an opportunity to network and build a rapport with that visiting faculty member, who may be helpful in the student's admission process as a friendly face on a campus tour or as a professional connection who can be mentioned on a college application. Additionally, advise your students to network with other students in the lab. They can offer insight into what it's like to be in college and in that particular field of study.



Bob Malkin working with local high school students on a cancer detection system in the lab.

3

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

All high school students working in university labs should ask for letters of recommendation from their PI and should be prepared to help with the draft. Faculty are busy and appreciate anything that makes their lives easier. It is both professional and helpful for the student to draft parts of the letter that they wish the PI would write, and to help collect details like the job's start date, direct supervisor, project summary, and their main responsibilities, all of which takes time to wrangle.

5

UTILIZE NEW CONNECTIONS

As soon as your student knows where they will be attending college, especially if it's at a different institution, they should ask the PI and other connections if they know someone at their future alma mater. Lab positions can be difficult to obtain as an undergraduate student. If the PI is willing to vouch for your student, they are more likely to get a lab position at their new university. 🌈

4

DEMONSTRATE INTEREST

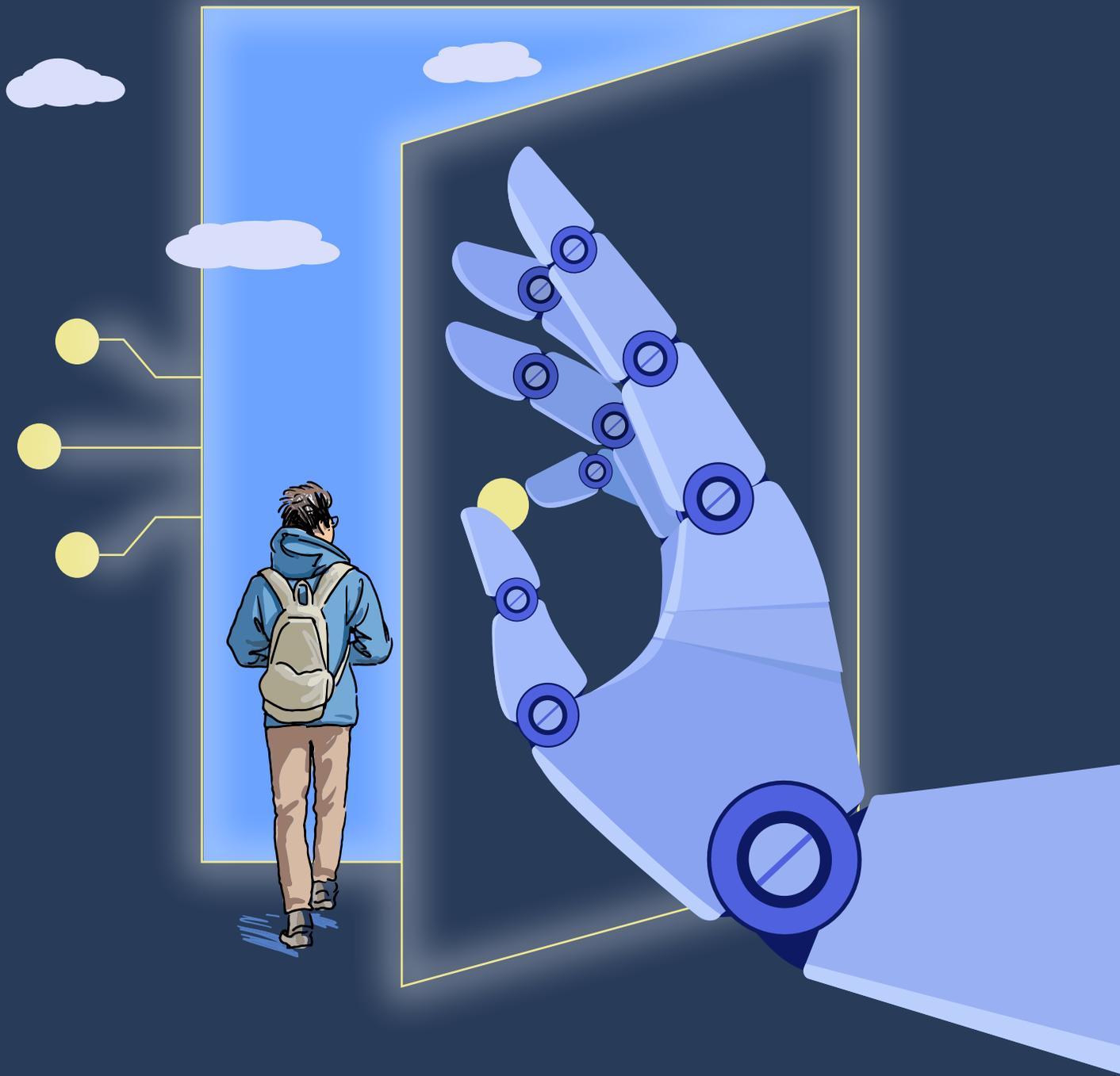
A director of undergraduate studies often is consulted by the admission office or even sits on the admission committee. If your student is considering applying to the university where they are working, they should find this director and ask for a meeting to discuss admission. Counsel them to mention that they are working in their PI's lab and tell them to come prepared with questions about the institution's application and admission process.

Bob Malkin, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus of the practice of biomedical engineering and global health at Duke University (NC). He is the academic director of the International Research Institute of North Carolina.

A(I) MACHINE IN THE PROCESS

When it comes to artificial intelligence, there's no 'right' way to use it. But AI is changing how both students and counselors approach college admission — whether you're ready or not.

By Laura J. Cole



On the last Sunday in September, 17-year-old Liam Lewis did what many high school seniors were doing: think about college applications. He had researched his top choices, reviewed their requirements, and worked on rewriting his essay.

“I didn’t exactly like how it turned out the first time,” said Lewis, who drafted it last spring for a class assignment at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado.

Like many of his peers, he turned to ChatGPT. He admits the tool is helpful for editing and brainstorming, and he occasionally uses it to help with studying and homework. According to [Quizlet’s 2025 How America Learns Report](#), Lewis is among the 89 percent of students ages 14 to 25 who use generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, for schoolwork. That number has jumped 12 percentage points since 2024 and will likely continue to rise. Outside of coursework, students are using AI in a range of ways: for mental health counseling, to generate social media content and break-up texts, to edit photos, and more.

Rick Clark, executive director of strategic student access at the Georgia Institute of Technology, anticipated this shift early on. Shortly after ChatGPT’s release in late 2022, he

noticed his teenagers tinkering with it. After talking with his computer science colleagues, Clark recognized prospective students would need guidance on how they could — and could not — use generative AI. In July 2023, Georgia Tech became one of the first universities to publish an AI admission policy, encouraging prospective students to use tools like ChatGPT to brainstorm, edit, and refine their ideas, but not to copy and paste generated content wholesale.

“AI usage is one of the biggest questions on students’ minds,” said Clark. “I’m proud we got it right and addressed it early.”

Since then, the Common App has adopted a similar policy, which most colleges defer to. However, some do not. Georgetown University (D.C.) requires applicants to sign a statement affirming they didn’t use AI for any part of their application. (Georgetown representatives denied a request for an interview.) A user of the Common App, Brown University (RI) has its own policy, which forbids the use of AI “under any circumstances in conjunction with application content” except to assist with spelling and grammar review. For some schools, those decisions may align with university-wide policies and reflect the experience students will have while on campus. To many AI users, though, bans seem

harsh given that AI is an umbrella term that applies to more than generative AI and is embedded widely in everything from Google search results to Microsoft Word.

“When college reps say students may not use AI,” said Jeff Neill, director of college counseling at Graded – The American School of São Paulo in Brazil, “I’ll ask, ‘Does that mean they can’t use Grammarly? That’s AI. Can they not buy a SAT test-prep book on Amazon? Because that’s AI.’ It’s sloppy language and often not what they mean.”

Regardless of policy, the reality remains: Prospective students are using it.

And so are many of the counseling and admission professionals guiding them.

AI IS CHANGING COUNSELING OFFICES

Among college and admission counselors, attitudes toward AI fall along a spectrum. At one end are the Luddites, who see it as a threat to the profession. At the other end are the evangelists, like Neill, who embrace its efficiency and equity.

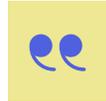
Neill has been a high school counselor for 25 years, having written hundreds of recommendation letters. Each letter once took him roughly three hours. With AI’s help, the time



When college reps say students may not use AI, I’ll ask, ‘Does that mean they can’t use Grammarly? That’s AI. Can they not buy a SAT test-prep book on Amazon? Because that’s AI.’ It’s sloppy language and often not what they mean.

Jeff Neill

Director of College Counseling
Graded – The American School of São Paulo



Tech is running full force with it, and they don't really care if educators are running next to them. I feel it's important that we enter and stay in the race, so if you're concerned about these issues, ignoring the technology is not the right answer.

Emily Pacheco
Co-Leader of NACAC's AI SIG

to complete a letter now averages 45 minutes. Neill spends that time actually writing, using AI to organize student questionnaires and anecdotes from teachers and peers. (For privacy, he replaces names with ID numbers and keeps all data off the cloud.)

"So much of that work was aggregating information," said Neill, who has spoken at more than 200 conferences on AI and education. "You know what AI is really good at? Aggregating information. We intentionally gave that time back to the kids, so we spend a lot more time one-on-one with our students."

Neill uses AI for more than recommendations. On his website, he shares AI prompts for prospective students, including how to build a college list, create an application schedule, and draft activity descriptions for the Common App. Many counselors at private schools have followed suit, using AI to help with everything from communicating with students, translating messages from non-English speaking parents, planning lessons, identifying students who need direct intervention, and helping students with the college admission process itself. At Rowland Hall in Salt Lake City, Co-Director of College Counseling Michelle Rasich uses AI to build college lists, draft emails, and instruct students on how

to use artificial intelligence tools to prep for interviews, explore majors and careers, and develop college-visit itineraries.

"I may not be the earliest adopter, but I am definitely an efficiency ninja, and that's what got me all in," Rasich said during a recent NACAC webinar on AI and college admission.

But for large public school districts, adoption is slower, often due to an absence of policies and safety concerns around student data. (The counselors in public schools contacted for this article either didn't respond to interview requests or responded that they couldn't participate.)

Privacy remains a major concern, and for good reason. With no federal AI regulations in the U.S., AI systems can collect and use data without transparency or consent. Personal information can be nearly impossible to remove or correct and may be exploited for phishing, fraud, identity theft, and extortion. AI also reflects human biases, and carries environmental costs, such as high water-usage, carbon emissions, and e-waste.

"It's important to acknowledge that generative AI was built on stolen data from artists and authors, was created on the backs of marginalized people, and uses an enormous amount of energy," said Emily



The values and mission of the institution need to align really well with the application for admission. You see colleges taking varied approaches with AI because of their different values and missions.

Benjamin Baum
Vice President of Enrollment
St. John's College (MD and NM)

Pacheco, who co-leads NACAC's AI SIG. "But it's not going away. Tech is running full force with it, and they don't really care if educators are running next to them. I feel it's important that we enter and stay in the race, so if you're concerned about these issues, ignoring the technology is not the right answer."

AI IS CHANGING ADMISSION OFFICES

Far from ignoring the technology, Elena D. Hicks, a member of NACAC's AI SIG, is "taking a thoughtful and unrushed walk into AI."

For the past two years, the assistant vice provost and dean of admission at Southern Methodist University (TX) has been researching AI as part of her doctoral program, which has since turned into a passion project. She's researched the concerns posed by AI and recently started vetting vendors and examining ways to use AI to help evaluate applications, such as by recalculating GPAs and assessing transcripts. Hicks is also exploring how to use AI to support student ambassadors and is engaging campus partners in conversations about the role of AI in her office's work.

"We want to do this the right way," she said. "I believe how each office moves forward with AI should be a university decision, so that the technology is integrated and people are knowledgeable about what the other offices are doing."

On the other end of the spectrum, Arizona State University — which was the first university to partner with OpenAI — was an early and enthusiastic adopter of AI.

"We're pretty comprehensive and holistic in not only our acceptance of AI, but also our usage of it," said Matt Lopez, deputy vice president for academic enterprise enrollment at ASU.

ASU's admission team uses AI to



Families and students put an enormous amount of trust in colleges and universities to handle their application with care.

Juan Espinoza

Vice Provost for Enrollment Management
Virginia Tech

help personalize communications, streamline the transfer process, process transcripts, and verify information. Since 2018, they have partnered with Othot to build predictive enrollment models. Their law school was among the first in the country to encourage prospective students to use ChatGPT on their essays. They have also partnered with CollegeVine to launch Sundial, an AI recruiter, and developed their own AI bot to specifically assist military and veteran students.

"Admission requires a lot of very time-intensive, back-end processes," said Lopez, whose team reviewed more than 200,000 applications for fall 2025. "AI helps eliminate a lot of them and lets us do everything from getting decisions out quicker to upskilling staff faster so we can have more human interaction, rather than primarily being processors of transcripts."

Virginia Tech has turned to AI with the same hope. Earlier this year, the institution announced a change to its process to expediate the review of the 58,000 applications it receives each year. Each applicant submits four essays that are read by two to three readers. That adds up to more than a half-million essays, requiring some 16,000 hours of total reading.

Working with psychology faculty member Louis Hickman, the team at

Virginia Tech developed an AI reader that reviews essays alongside human readers. Initial tests are promising. With AI, they were able to cut 8,000 hours from the reading process. That efficiency, said Vice Provost for Enrollment Management Juan Espinoza, will allow the university to address requests from families to send out decisions earlier.

"We feel really confident our AI reader is performing just as well as a human reader," he said, "and that it will allow us to expedite the process and shave at least a month off our decision notification timeline, allowing us to move from (a) late February/early March decision timeline to late January — and hoping to do better than that."

The time gained will be used to refocus volunteers on outreach efforts, providing prospective students with more contacts to reach out to with questions. Espinoza is excited about the efficiency and increased chances for human interactions, but most proud of the safeguards put in place for each applicant, the way the university ensures students' data remains safe, and the transparency with which it was able to announce this change in its process.

"Families and students put an enormous amount of trust in colleges and universities to handle their application with care," said Espinoza. "We

have a responsibility to be transparent about what we're doing on our side."

NOT ALL UNIVERSITIES ARE AS FORTHCOMING.

According to Pacheco, those decisions can be complicated, but there's as much to lose in staying silent as in speaking up.

"Universities are scared," she said. "They think that they can really mess this up. They think it's safer to be silent or do things behind closed doors. But it's really important, especially at this time when people are losing faith in higher education, for us to be transparent."

In August, NACAC updated their [Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission](#), including a new section on AI. The text encourages admission officers to "ensure that any use of AI in counseling and admission aligns with our shared values of transparency, integrity, fairness, and respect for student dignity."

HERE'S WHAT AI WON'T CHANGE

Despite its seeming invasiveness, AI hasn't replaced the human element of admission. Far from it.

Lewis, the high school senior, used ChatGPT to assist with his essay, and even to help him research his top schools. But he still trusts the experts more than an algorithm. It's why he's also been working with a college coach.

"(My coach) has a lot more understanding of what the essay needs to be," said Lewis. "She's seen so many of them and has seen what has — and what hasn't — gotten people into college. AI can't comprehend that, in my opinion."

Benjamin Baum, vice president of enrollment at St. John's College, which has campuses in Maryland and New Mexico, echoes the value of human experiences. While his team

is looking to use AI to find prospects and identify the shared qualities of successful students, they've also created an admission pathway that removes AI entirely. In 2023, they launched a Discussion-Based Application option, which replaces the two letters of recommendation and essay requirements with two interviews and participation in a seminar on campus. The option, Baum said, offers an opportunity for authenticity that Gen Z craves. Still, he acknowledges such a model is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

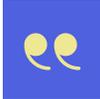
"The values and mission of the institution need to align really well with the application for admission," he said. "You see colleges taking varied approaches with AI because of their different values and missions."

At Georgia Tech, where the mission is focused on making a positive impact in the lives of people everywhere, staff is using AI to advance equity in the admission process. Clark has partnered with Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities to leverage machine learning and AI to help identify financial aid need earlier in the process, especially for Pell-eligible students. The school can then offer one-on-one meetings, conversations, and programming for students who need additional coaching.

"Every year, we lose students who are eligible for financial aid because they miss deadlines or drop out because they didn't realize they were eligible," said Clark. "This program is about closing gaps and providing additional resources to students who don't have them at home — and oftentimes, don't even have them in their school."

Ultimately, the biggest argument for embracing AI in the admission process — despite all the concerns — is that it can help support the students and families going through the process, and even the professionals



 The beauty of AI is being able to offload the things that machines do better than us anyway and letting the humans do the things that we so desperately need more humans to do.

Rick Clark

Executive Director of Strategic Student Access
Georgia Institute of Technology

who are helping them. Where it goes next is anyone's guess, but Clark and everyone interviewed for this piece echo a similar sentiment.

"The beauty of AI, in my opinion, is being able to offload the things that machines do better than us anyway and letting the humans do the things that we so desperately need more humans to do," he said. "I say this with two kids in high school. If I can have a high school counselor taking less time to have to write a recommendation letter, and more time sitting down with my kid, walking the halls, and having their door open — that is a win." 

Laura J. Cole is a freelance writer who lives in Portland, Oregon. She used ChatGPT to assist with researching and editing this article.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CLIFF IS HERE

By Jim Paterson

A drop in new high school graduates is expected to begin this year, marking the start of the anticipated demographic cliff.



Nathan Grawe recognizes the dizzying host of challenges that higher education faces. Among them: the demographic cliff.

The distinguished economics professor at Carleton College (MN) and author of *The Agile College* has a straightforward recommendation: “The strategy that gives me the most hope is simple: serve students well.”

Grawe is among a host of experts who are warning postsecondary institutions about the decline in the number of traditional college-aged prospects. He and others are urging colleges to adjust with a goal of increasing and broadening recruitment and improving retention.

But regardless of which strategy an institution pursues, experts agree: Colleges must act.

“If a college is just now thinking about changing demographics, they are already behind the curve,” said Heath Einstein, vice president for enrollment management at Texas Christian University (TCU). “That said, one of the lessons from 2020 and 2021 (a period when college enrollment dropped nearly 20 percent) is that, when need be, higher

The strategies that worked in the past may not be the answer in a decade defined by decline, competition, and change.

education can move with alacrity.”

Colleges are beginning to “re-think recruiting strategies, program offerings, and whether we focus on certain populations and even look at offering a variety of modalities,” said Beverly Woodson Day, assistant vice president for enrollment management and director of admissions at Texas State University.

She says colleges will see a decline in enrollment, followed by slight growth, and then an even bigger decline over the next decade.

“It is a major concern for higher education,” she said. “Knowing that this is coming has caused our team to think differently and adjust recruitment and communication strategies. The approach in the past

often has been, if it’s not broken, there is no need to fix it, or one that recommends simply recruiting harder. Moving forward, those strategies may not be the answer.”

WHAT’S AHEAD

Predictions about the precise timing and extent of the “cliff” are varied, but the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) reported late last year that the number of high school graduates peaked at between 3.8 million to 3.9 million this year and will begin a gradual descent that will result in about 13 percent fewer graduates by 2041.

Grawe said that the birth rate peaked in 2007 and in every year



Knowing that this is coming has caused our team to think differently and adjust recruitment and communication strategies. The approach in the past often has been, if it’s not broken, there is no need to fix it, or one that recommends simply recruiting harder. Moving forward, those strategies may not be the answer.

Beverly Woodson Day

Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Director of Admissions
Texas State University



They say necessity is the mother of invention. Perhaps this is the time to innovate, shake up the education system altogether, and think outside the box.

Oksana Leukhina
Senior Economist
Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

since, it has declined. That means 2025 saw the peak of graduating high school seniors in the U.S. and the numbers will drop accordingly. In four years, there will be more than 400,000 fewer students.

“Over the next five years, we expect about a 7 to 8 percent drop in the size of the high school graduating class,” said Oksana Leukhina, the senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, who has studied college enrollment. “After that, there is a small rebound followed by another decline. By 2035, the overall drop is closer to 12 to 13 percent.”

WICHE also reported that 38 states are projected to see a decline in the number of graduates by 2041, while just 12 states will see an increase. The Midwest and Northeast already have experienced declines and the South “continues to defy broader national trends with growth followed by a slight decline at the end of the projections,” according to WICHE.

The demographic cliff is no longer a future problem. It is already reshaping higher education.

Eight states will see a sizable decline in high school graduates: Hawaii (33 percent), Illinois (32 percent), California (29 percent), New York (27 percent), West Virginia (26 percent), Wyoming (23 percent), New Mexico (21 percent), and Michigan (20 percent). The largest regional decrease is projected for the West, with a 20 percent decline, followed by the Northeast (a 17 percent decline) and Midwest (a 16 percent decline), according to [the WICHE report](#).

In the south, the number of graduates is projected to rise by 2041, according to WICHE, led by increases in Tennessee (15 percent), South Carolina (14 percent), and Florida (12 percent).

But Grawe cautions that these state and regional projections may not be entirely reliable.

“I think it’s a mistake to ignore the connections between markets,” he said. “For example, while Oklahoma is projected to experience more stability in high school grads

than some other states, neighboring Kansas expects decline. Surely some Kansas schools will increase recruitment activity across the border and tighten the market for students in Oklahoma.”

WHICH INSTITUTIONS WILL FEEL IT MOST

Certain types of institutions may be affected more severely by the demographic cliff, particularly smaller liberal arts colleges.

“It’s likely to hit hardest for non-selective, tuition-dependent schools,” said Michael Horn, an education researcher and author of several books about higher education. “Up to this point, I’d been expecting it to hit hardest for smaller nonprofit schools and regional publics, but a more recent analysis we’re working on suggests to me that the ripple could be felt quite significantly into midsize, tuition-dependent nonprofits that aren’t selective but have strong brands in some cases.”

For-profit schools have already begun to see the shift, he said, but will likely have further struggles. He believes it is “less clear how enrollment will reallocate across different types of public schools.”

Grawe said that no institution should feel too comfortable.

“My work suggests that the demographics are a bit stronger for

highly selective institutions. That said, those schools should not rest on their laurels,” he said. “Just as recruitment crosses state borders, less-selective schools experiencing enrollment shortfalls are likely to recruit more aggressively. Indeed, College Board data suggests we are already seeing intensive competition with net fees remaining flat for many years now.”

The past may hold some clues about how colleges will weather the current demographic cliff, said Leukhina, citing a 17 percent decline in the size of the 18-year-old cohort in the 1980s.

Ultimately, selective public schools were less affected by that cliff than other institutions, she said. Since 1970, and through the demographic decline of the 1980s, enrollment at flagship state universities consistently accounted for roughly 18 percent of total freshman enrollment across all public colleges and universities. This trend continued amid the enrollment cliff of the 1980s despite the enrollment shifts experienced elsewhere.

But now, “it is less clear how enrollment will reallocate across different types of public schools,” she said.

The demographic cliff of the 1980s recovered significantly in the 1990s and 2000s, when the number of 18-year-olds eligible to attend college increased over those two decades by nearly 25 percent, according to Leukhina’s data. Experts today aren’t as confident.

“That’s really a question for the demographers,” Grawe said. “But I would note as an economist that current (low) U.S. fertility levels aren’t odd in an international context. We now look much more like Europe, Japan, and Canada.”

“Seen through that lens, it’s not clear why we would expect a rebound,” he added, noting that the U.S. was previously an outlier in having such a high birth rate that continually expanded the population.

HOW COLLEGES CAN RESPOND

Leukhina said colleges will have to be agile and creative.

“They say necessity is the mother of invention. Perhaps this is the time to innovate, shake up the education system altogether, and think outside the box,” she said, suggesting that institutions study alternative pathways and better respond to what employers and students expect from higher education.

“What do the students want to get out of college?” she asks. “What is special about (the) 120 credits that it takes to get a BA? What if we offer three-year specialized degrees? What if we offer major-specific tuition rates? How can we redesign the system so that the students, employers, and colleges benefit from these reforms?”

Others point out that, above all else, colleges should accept that things will change and should have a plan.

Einstein has a list of strategies he believes college admission offices should follow:

- Focus on markets with opportunity for high engagement
- Tell your unique story driven by core values
- Utilize low-cost technology like social media
- Restructure staff roles to maximize your team’s strengths
- Partner with nearby institutions for joint recruitment

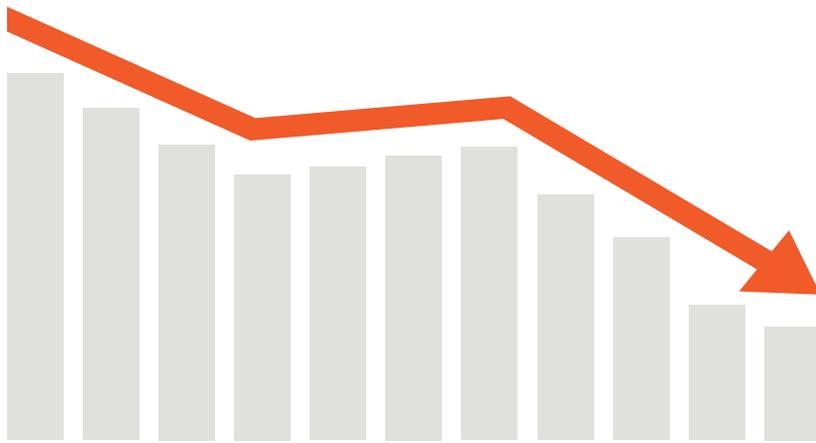
“TCU is leaning into our strengths and popularity by expanding opportunities for students as part of a new strategic plan, Lead On: Values



Paradoxically, as the universe of available students shrinks, colleges should avoid trying to go after every student by being everything to everyone. Instead, colleges must focus on what makes them distinctive in a crowded and more competitive marketplace.

Heath Einstein

Vice President for Enrollment Management
Texas Christian University



After decades of growth, the number of high school graduates is beginning a long and uneven decline.

in Action, which calls for investments in research and community engagement, for instance,” Leukhina said.

TCU is focusing on digital advertising, social media, and new technology like artificial intelligence. The institution also doubled down on financial aid programs such as TCU for Texans and the Brenda and Mike Harrison Endowed Scholarship to support low- and middle-income families.

“The ever-changing political landscape adds a layer of complexity to the recruitment process,” Leukhina said. “At the end of the day, however, the focus must be on creating connection with prospective students.”

Horn said colleges should “focus on what differentiates them from other schools and eliminate the things in which they aren’t well-positioned to serve, programmatically or for certain students.”

“The days of being all the things to all people are dead, and institutions need to lean into specific propositions that are valued,” he said, recommending collaborating

with employers on work-based experience programs and other partnerships.

Along with addressing recruitment strategies, program offerings, and different modalities, colleges are considering market analyses, benchmarking against peer institutions, and approaching different markets and non-traditional students, Woodson Day said.

“I also believe institutions are focusing on creating partnerships with other universities, including two-year colleges, to create pathways,” she said. “You can use partnerships for online course sharing and other strategies to still offer the odd course or experience that students want. And you can accomplish some of the cost reduction pieces of this by not replacing people who retire.”

She believes retention is key, and Grawe agrees, particularly in this climate.

“Improving retention rates directly generates more semesters of enrollment from the same pool of students. But the indirect effect is just as important. By demonstrating value, higher student success rates

are likely to attract more students given students’ increasing interest in the return on their investment,” Grawe said.

He notes that research shows student success and retention are reliant on academic support and preparation, financial assistance, and a sense of belonging — the “three legs of the traditional retention stool.”

“Many institutions have found retention improvement possible through concerted efforts in line with the research. Those success stories give me evidence-based optimism that colleges can succeed in ways that serve our students more effectively while supporting the enrollment picture,” he said.

Leukhina said colleges should create a “consistent innovation process” to build new revenue streams through programs that are separate from core offerings.

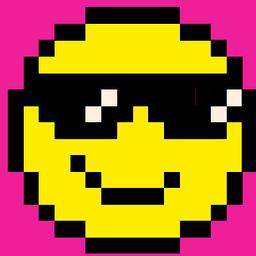
“Some of this may be online, but the bigger reality I think is that the need for education is increasing quite a lot – among those in their careers who see technology changing the nature of work,” she said. “Schools won’t be able to serve this population well with their existing structures.”

Einstein echoes the advice of serving students well and focusing on strengths.

“Paradoxically, as the universe of available students shrinks, colleges should avoid trying to go after every student by being everything to everyone,” he said. “Instead, colleges must focus on what makes them distinctive in a crowded and more competitive marketplace.”

Jim Paterson is a freelance writer living in Lewes, Delaware.

GAME ON!



By Melissa Brock

The explosive rise of esports is shaking up traditional student-athlete recruitment. Millions of students annually engage in esports — some so competitively that it influences their college choice. Here's how colleges and universities are responding to the interests of this growing market of students.

Most nights and weekends, Jeanna Dawson coaches Fremont High School (MI)

students as the school's head esports coach. She's a gamer herself, owner of Emergent Esports League, and has seen high school students take up interest in esports en masse, even earning varsity letters for their participation.

Her son — also a gamer — showed her just how much potential there truly is in the sport when he earned a nearly full-ride scholarship to attend Milligan University (TN) to play esports.

And he's not alone: Approximately \$16 million in scholarships was awarded to esports athletes in 2020, [according to neaToday](#), a publication of the National Education Association. More than 260 universities across North America offer esports scholarships, according to The National Association of Collegiate Esports.

Some have integrated esports into their campuses as an extracurricular offering or through competitive play, citing such offerings as tools for student retention and engagement. Other institutions have integrated esports into the curriculum, with relevant degree programs and job placement opportunities for students interested in the esports industry.

The global data company Statista predicts the esports market will reach 896 million users worldwide by 2029.

"Gaming is so relevant to a large percentage of people of college age. If you just boil it down to that, gaming, culturally, is relevant. So many students are looking for a university...that thinks about gaming," said Todd Harris, CEO of Resurgens Gaming, which helps companies market to their gaming audience. Harris also chairs two major nonprofits: the Network of

Academic and Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) and the U.S. Esports Federation (USEF).

While there's no one-size-fits-all approach to incorporating esports into campus life, here's what's undeniable: The growth of esports has created a wealth of opportunities for students and campuses alike.

MORE VIABLE THAN TRADITIONAL SPORTS

For many students, gaming is a fun pastime and an avenue to make friends and enhance their social skills. For others, esports represents a path to college, scholarships, and potentially even a life-long career, similar to the role traditional sports like football and basketball have filled for generations.

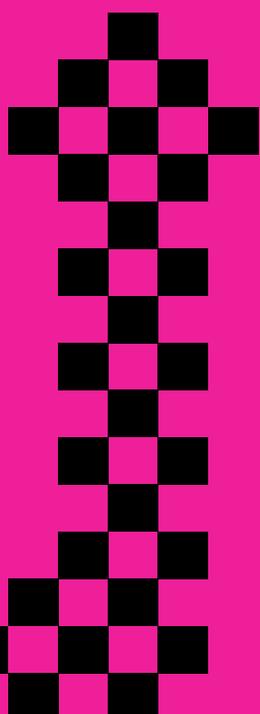
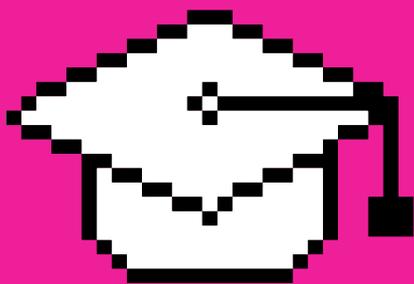
"For some students, esports is proving to be a more viable opportunity than traditional sports," Dawson said.

NASEF serves more than 6,500 students in nearly 700 clubs across 44 states and 12 Canadian provinces. NASEF's goal is to leverage interest in esports to engage students — particularly underserved youth — in academic content and to develop their social skills.

NASEF partners with PlayVS, which offers middle and high school esports leagues across the country, to host Rocket League, League of Legends, Super Smash Bros Ultimate, Madden NFL 24, and NBA2K24 tournaments, among others.

In 2017, when NASEF partnered with the University of California, Irvine to survey student involvement in esports, the results were eye-opening.

"What was off the charts was the kids' social-emotional development. Moreno Valley in Southern California showed 60.2 percent of these kids had never been in any extracurricular.



So just imagine, you've never had a coach. You've never been on a team. You've never had a club, and now you do. And the impacts of that are massive. It just changes these kids' trajectory," said Claire LaBeaux, chief advancement officer of NASEF.

Parents also seem to agree. In a survey of parents' perceived benefits of their children's involvement in esports:

- 85 percent of parents cited school affiliation as a top benefit.
- 62 percent cited general life skills as a top benefit.
- 46 percent cited college and career preparation as a top benefit.
- 31 percent cited hand-eye coordination as a top benefit.

"Moreno Valley also looked at attendance. Kids in esports attended school nine more days than other kids," said LaBeaux, who added that students who participated in esports also generally reported a higher year-end GPA.

HOW COLLEGES ARE RESPONDING

When Augustana College (IL) was looking to revamp some of its campus facilities, the rising interest in esports served as an inspiration. Now, next

to its campus bookstore is the Viking Esports Center, which features 20 PC gaming stations, three state-of-the-art gaming console stations, a broadcast studio, a kitchenette, and meeting spaces.

Although esports is not an NCAA-sanctioned varsity sport like others at Augustana, the college offers up to \$3,000 in scholarships to esports student-athletes based on evaluation by coaches and the college's financial aid office. To qualify, students must be committed to varsity esports participation, support of their teammates, and show satisfactory progress toward a degree. A club-level sport at Augustana since 2017, the esports program has about 45 committed student-athletes. The entire student body at Augustana is 2,500 students.

Investing in esports "centered on our mission of being able to provide opportunities for leadership and wellness," said Mike Pettis, director of admissions for student-athlete recruitment at Augustana. "A number of our esports student-athletes are international students, and many of them have interest in more technical, related academic programs," including computer science, data analytics, and engineering.

Investing in the infrastructure for esports can enhance retention and stoke inclusivity on campuses. Colleges and universities also are leaning into the rise of esports by offering academic pathways for esports management, game design, and digital media.

Alyssa Duran, esports manager at Shenandoah University (VA), said Shenandoah's esports program mixes competitive play, broadcast production, and academics into a structured yet flexible program for



 For some students, esports is proving to be a more viable opportunity than traditional sports.

Jeanna Dawson
Esports Head Coach
Shenandoah University (VA)

students. Shenandoah launched the program as a club and later developed it into a structured varsity program in 2018. The university's academic esports program was one of the first in the nation and now includes undergraduate majors, minors, and certificates in esports; a graduate-level concentration/certificate; and an online coaching certificate.

Around 75 Shenandoah students are involved in esports, with their engagement ranging from competition to enrollment in a related academic program.

"Our main offering is an esports management degree, but we have different tracks — management courses, business core classes, and a media or communication route," Duran said. "If students want to



HOW TO GET INVOLVED

HIGH SCHOOLS CAN SIGN UP FOR A FREE NASEF MEMBERSHIP AND COLLEGES CAN START RECRUITING AT LEAGUEOS.

study a different degree, they can add on a certificate or minor. We also have a specialized certificate in esports coaching, and we offer some graduate-level courses, including an MBA with an esports management concentration or certificate.”

Pettis said participation in esports can bolster students’ skills in a wide variety of academic majors.

“As I think about some of the skills that students need to develop, I think about a pre-med student who maybe wants to become a surgeon. Well, having dexterity and hand-eye coordination, those are skills that you’re developing as an esports athlete,” he said.

Shoutcasting — which includes commentary during esports games and matches — can give a boost to students who are interested in communication studies, multimedia journalism, or film. Those interested in political science or economics, meanwhile, can pursue esports law and governance, Pettis said.

At a minimum, students learn teamwork, communication, social-emotional skills, and emotional regulation, said Harris. They also can learn critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical skills and enhance their comfort with technology, digital literacy, and graphic design programs.



GOVERNING ORGANIZATIONS OF ESPORTS

The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) is the largest collegiate esports association in North America, containing over 170 member schools.

PlayVS is a scholastic, collegiate esports and gaming platform that helps students connect with gaming.

Both organizations provide formal governance to create teams, scholarships, and dedicated facilities across the country.

At least 74 colleges and universities worldwide offer varying degrees and certificates related to esports, including esports business and management, history of esports, and media production and communication.

Through each of these avenues, colleges increase their potential for revenue through sponsorships, partnerships, and event hosting, as well as increased enrollment revenue.

TIPS FOR ENROLLMENT MANAGERS

Pettis said one of the most important things institutions can do is to have a digital presence to promote their esports offerings. It’s also important to strategize and collaborate.

“I meet regularly with our esports coach to review any students through our application funnel who have indicated an interest or a background in esports,” said Pettis. “Then we have to kind of merge those records together to ensure that the coach has the information that he needs about that student’s background.”

Further, new tools are emerging to aid in the recruitment of students with an interest in esports.

For instance, LeagueOS is a free platform where students create esports profiles for colleges to discover. The platform compiles player stats and allows students to indicate whether they’re looking for colleges. Over 500 institutions are listed on the platform, searchable by game, location, and degree program.



As I think about some of the skills that students need to develop, I think about a pre-med student who maybe wants to become a surgeon. Well, having dexterity and hand-eye coordination, those are skills that you’re developing as an esports athlete.

Mike Pettis

Director of Admissions for Student-Athlete Recruitment
Augustana College (IL)

“For example, you can say you’re looking for all colleges in Minnesota that play Rocket League, and you can even sort by degree program. All you have to do is go to the site, and it’s free for the colleges to be part of that search,” said Marty Wetherall, co-founder and CEO of LeagueOS.

With over 25,000 students in the system, it’s become a new tool in connecting colleges to students interested in esports.

THE CHALLENGES

Despite its undeniable popularity, “some people don’t want to consider it a sport,” said Wetherall.

“And the other thing that is challenging is that faculty members who could put their arms around it and become the director or adviser or coach — none of them grew up with esports in schools,” he said.

Some campuses have trouble deciding the “how,” “what,” and “where” of developing a team, but Harris said institutions can start small. Even just 10 to 20 computers in a student union can serve a ton of students with a bit of investment and the right programming.

“You can have it be used by your high-level players who are aspiring to go pro, but also have those same computers ‘timeshared.’ In other words, how can a college focus on activating this space for the broadest number of students possible?” Harris said.

Some of the most popular esports games today are League of Legends, Overwatch 2, Rocket League, Valorant, and Super Smash Bros.

How should schools go about selecting a focus? Whether at the college or high school level, it’s important to follow what the students want, Harris said.

TIPS FOR HIGH SCHOOL LEADERS

LaBeaux helps school districts set up esports at their schools. She encourages district leaders to start by asking themselves a series of questions:

- Which student groups should benefit?
- Why will they benefit?
- Who else should provide input?
- Who will lead?
- Will we have an internal league?
- How many seasons will we have?
- What grades will compete?
- What outside leagues or tournaments will we emphasize?
- What about scholastics?
- When will it happen? During classes or just after school?

She then helps clients identify a manager and teaches them how to conduct a pre-enrollment survey, hold a parent information night, collect names for the initial club rosters, and set a schedule. Finally, her team teaches school district clients how to practice and compete while sustaining their outreach efforts.

“One of the hardest things for a coach or school to figure out is which of these games are we really going to invest in with a coach and with scholarship players? Is this going to be a game that’s around for 10 years or 20 years, as many games have been? Or is this a flash in the pan?” Harris added. “These are all part of the growing pains of the industry.”

Melissa Brock is an editor, freelance writer, essay and college coach, and founder of College Money Tips. She spent 12 years in college admission as an admission counselor and senior associate director of admission at Central College (IA).



CALL FOR PROPOSALS

October 8 – 10, 2026

Minneapolis Convention Center
Minneapolis, MN



INSIDE NACAC

Happenings at Headquarters

**CONTINUE
ACCESSING
PREMIER
RESOURCES!**

THERE'S STILL TIME
TO RENEW YOUR
NACAC MEMBERSHIP



We are grateful to the thousands of members who renewed their NACAC membership for 2026. We are looking forward to another year of impactful professional development and advocacy. If you have not renewed your membership, there is still time! Be sure to renew soon so you maintain access to all of the benefits you rely on.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES
**CALL FOR
CANDIDATES**

'26

LEARN MORE

**APPLY BY:
FEB. 27 | 5 P.M. ET**

APPLY TO SERVE ON THE NACAC BOARD OF TRUSTEES

NACAC members can [apply to serve on the NACAC Board of Trustees](#) through Feb. 27. There are four open positions: three trustees and one chair-elect. Eligible NACAC members will vote to elect the three trustees, while the Board of Trustees will select the chair-elect. Recorded videos are available to help you learn more about the application process and what to expect of board service.



WANT TO PRESENT AT NACAC CONFERENCE 2026? SUBMIT YOUR EDUCATION SESSION PROPOSAL

NACAC is accepting proposals for education sessions through March 16. [Read tips on how to create a strong education session proposal](#) from NACAC member Robert Harry, who presented at NACAC Conference 2025 in Columbus, Ohio. Last year, more than 140 education sessions delivered timely insights and practical strategies to attendees. Building on that success, NACAC Conference 2026, happening Oct. 8-10 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, will be even more impactful. Presenters of selected education sessions will be notified in early May.

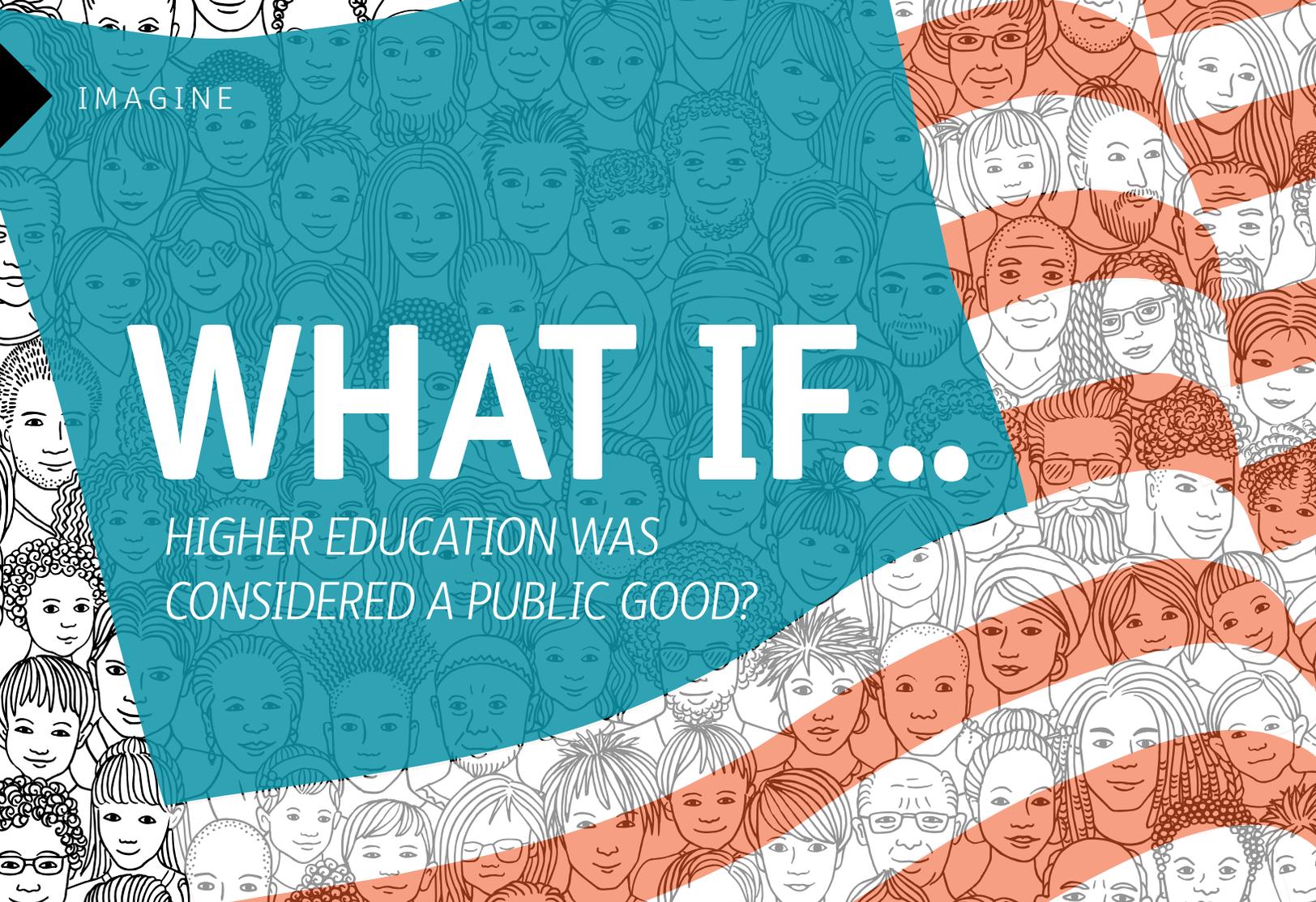


INVEST IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN 2026

NACAC offers a [variety of webinars, certificate programs, and on-demand courses](#) tailored to the needs of college admission counseling professionals. Get the most of your NACAC membership this year by expanding your knowledge. If you're interested in helping develop NACAC professional development offerings, [apply to serve as faculty](#).

NACAC AFFILIATE ANNUAL CONFERENCES START SOON

NACAC's 23 affiliate organizations offer networking and professional development opportunities throughout the year to support their members' continued growth and education. [Affiliate conferences are available](#) around the country beginning in late February and continuing through mid-July.



IMAGINE

WHAT IF...

HIGHER EDUCATION WAS
CONSIDERED A PUBLIC GOOD?

Imagine if higher education was widely considered a public good for its benefits to society. Imagine if state and federal government systems invested into higher education as if it were a public good, making it more accessible for a wider array of students.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:

Calculations show that education spending generates the highest fiscal returns of any public program, making it a valuable government investment, according to the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research. Investments in postsecondary education are an investment in society's wellbeing. College graduates are more likely to vote,

strengthening our democracy. College graduates earn more over their lifetimes and contribute more to taxes, as they have a higher rate of employment than adults who did not attend college. College graduates also are more likely to have a healthy diet and to exercise, resulting in less burden on the nation's healthcare system.

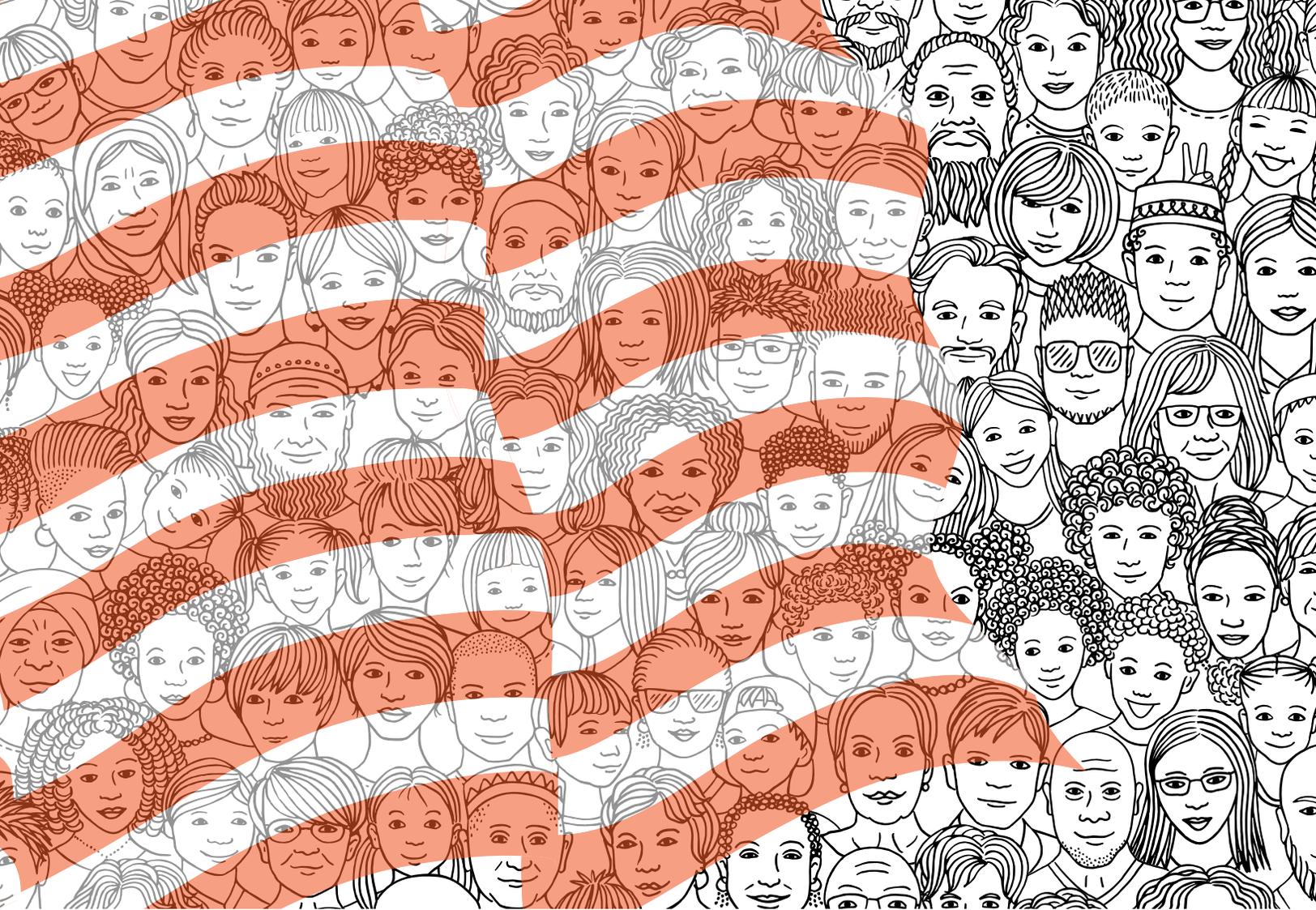
THE ISSUE:

Public funding for higher education is facing intensified political attacks. Actions by the Trump administration continuously threaten education equity, academic freedom, institutional stability, and the public's perception of earning a postsecondary education, according to the

National Education Association. The result: The life-changing benefits of earning a college education are out of reach for millions of students. When public funding dwindles, the cost to earn a postsecondary education is put on students and families in the form of higher tuition and fees. Low-income and marginalized students are disproportionately affected by these economic shifts.

WHAT NACAC IS DOING ABOUT IT:

NACAC is working to preserve higher education as a public good by advocating for strong, stable federal investments that keep



higher education within reach. We continue pressing Congress to address the Pell Grant shortfall, protect campus-based aid, and maintain the Education Department's capacity to support students and institutions. Through federal comments, coalition letters, and direct engagement with policymakers, we highlight the real impacts of underinvestment on students, college admission counselors, and communities. NACAC also elevates members' insights and data showing how sustained public funding strengthens access, equity, and opportunity — reinforcing that higher education benefits every community and the entire nation. ➤

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

If you believe that higher education should be considered a public good, please consider donating to NACAC. As a nonprofit organization, donations to NACAC support the association's advocacy efforts on behalf of the college admission counseling profession.

INTERESTED IN SUPPORTING THIS EFFORT?

Any donation — big or small — makes a difference. Visit nacacnet.org/donate, or contact NACAC's Chief Advancement Officer Tommy Amal at tamal@nacacnet.org.



nacacnet.org/donate

College Admission is not ‘Zero-Sum’

The Supreme Court and the Trump administration are expressing a belief that college admission is zero-sum. Unsurprisingly, this belief system is a common worldview for people whose mindset perceives the world as a place where a ‘win’ for one person or one group is a ‘loss’ for another person or group.

By David Hawkins

In its 2023 *Students for Fair Admissions* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court majority opinion declared categorically that “(c)ollege admissions are zero-sum. A benefit provided to some applicants but not to others necessarily advantages the former at the expense of the latter.” The U.S. Department of Education parroted the court’s use of the term in an ambitious, albeit sub-regulatory, memo expanding on the court’s decision, deploying the term “zero-sum” four times in nine pages. As the Trump administration doubles-, triples-, and quadruples-down on the court’s decision as governing not just college admission, but the entirety of practice in K-12 and higher education, it’s worth questioning the court’s assertion.

What does it mean to be zero-sum? The concept emerged from game theory. In those terms, it occupies the simplest, most reductionist rung on the game theory ladder

in that it involves 1:1 competition, where one individual’s gain is necessarily the other individual’s loss. But college admission is not a 1:1 competition. It is also not the case that one student’s gain (an offer of admission) necessarily means that another student “loses” (receives a rejection letter).

No applicant is guaranteed or entitled to a spot at a specific college, no matter how stellar their academic record might be. Nor are they admitted at the expense of another student. While there are a finite number of seats, the admission of one student does not imply the denial of another, even in the abstract. According to College Navigator’s latest data, Harvard University accepted 3 percent of its 56,937 applications, a total of about 1,700 students. The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill admitted 19 percent of its 57,902 applicants, or 11,000 students. Students with stellar academic records will be

admitted to at least one college — and probably more — that fit a similar profile to these institutions and/or provide an exceptionally good fit. That’s hardly a zero-sum game.

Deans at highly selective colleges regularly note that they could toss out the batch of students they just accepted, take the next batch of students down the line, and still have a nearly identical class. The basis upon which these decisions are made varies and belies simplistic reduction. Indeed, research suggests that income and wealth are more likely to influence a student’s chances for admission to selective institutions rather than race or ethnicity.

However, we can guarantee that there is a spot in a higher education institution somewhere for all students, provided they have graduated from high school. According to NACAC’s [State of College Admission](#) data, the average acceptance rate for colleges with selective admission



While there are a finite number of seats, the admission of one student does not imply the denial of another, even in the abstract.

is 73 percent. When you incorporate open-enrollment two- and four-year colleges, the acceptance rate moves even higher, reflecting the reality that the level of scarcity is orders of magnitude lower than the court suggests.

Declaring that admission is “zero-sum,” therefore, does not make it so. Instead, what the Supreme Court and Trump administration are doing is expressing a belief that college admission is zero-sum. Unsurprisingly, this belief system is a common worldview for people whose mindset perceives the world as a place where a “win” for one person or one group is a “loss” for another person or group. A 2015 research study proposed “Belief in a Zero-Sum Game” — or BZSG — as a distinct social axiom, or a set of generalized beliefs about oneself and the social and physical environment.

BZSG is a general belief system about the antagonistic nature of social relations, shared by people in a society or culture and based on

the implicit assumption that a finite amount of goods exists in the world, in which one person’s winning makes others the losers, and vice versa.

As it turns out, zero-sum thinking is pervasive in America and globally. A recent academic study observed that zero-sum traits were not strongly associated with partisanship, but rather with economic variables (among others) and the perception of scarcity. Ironically, zero-sum thinking was strongly associated with support for redistributive policies on both sides of the political spectrum. Thus, on a polarized court, it’s no surprise that some justices would invoke zero-sum logic.

But, as Justice Sonia Sotomayor observed in a dissenting opinion, the zero-sum mindset simply does not reflect the reality of the way race was considered in college admission. As such, the court and the administration propagate an incorrect and biased (by zero-sum thinking) definition

of college admission, which they then conveniently attack using zero-sum logic.

The scarcity mindset and the fear of “losing” intensify unhelpful perspectives, including deeply entrenched racism and skewed perspectives about college admission, central to the decades-long debate over the role of race in admission. For too long, we have equated a college’s selectivity with quality, distorting the college admission landscape to resemble what one selective college dean memorably described as “the lunatic fringe.” College admission counseling professionals lament that college admission, for some students and families, is a “skins game.” That thinking, unfortunately, fuels the high-stakes nature of the admission debate nationally and invites the type of covetousness, discrimination, and willful misrepresentation that the current administration and its adherents perpetuate.

The question is why do we, as a society, allow such scarcity to exist when it is entirely within our power to alleviate it? During the COVID-19 pandemic, NACAC argued that if we are to recognize the educational and economic aspirations that will help keep America “great,” we must treat higher education as a public good and fund it accordingly. More recently, as Congress and the Trump administration take a sledgehammer to the federal investment in education, we urged that now is a time to invest in, not tear down, our nation’s commitment to education. Their approach will only lead to greater scarcity. ➤

David Hawkins worked for NACAC for more than 25 years, most recently as the chief education and policy officer.

You Aren't Lost. You're Being Led Somewhere New

The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to pivot. Now working in college counseling, I am thankful for the knowledge and friendships I've gained.

By Kate Trott

Five years ago, when I jumped headfirst into college counseling, I had no idea what I was signing up for. One minute I was working in academic support, and the next I was nominated to step into a role vacated by a counselor who had been guiding students for almost 20 years. Administration had apparently noticed both my love of research and my habit of giving students pep talks that left them believing they could take on the world. Even though the position seemed daunting, something in me knew I had to say yes.

What most people don't know is that this opportunity arrived after one of the hardest moments of my life. For years, I had run a STEAM-focused extracurricular learning center for students; a joyful, creative space where kids rediscovered curiosity, programmed robot Legos, worked on writing and reading skills while performing plays, and learned math while cooking. It was everything I loved about education, but outside the walls of a traditional classroom.



Kate Trott working with a student.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HIT

Like so many others, I fought to keep my doors open, adapting and pivoting until there was nothing left to give. Eventually, I had to close. Losing that space and those students — that sense of purpose — was devastating. I felt adrift, grieving both a dream and an identity.

That's when I went back to the school system, not out of grand ambition but out of survival and hope. My bandwidth was low, my confidence fragile. But being back in the rhythm of a school and helping students with essays, puzzles, and algebraic mysteries started to heal me. Slowly, I began to remember why I loved this work in the first place: Learning is deeply human and so is guiding it.

Then the opportunity to become a college counselor came up. I didn't see myself as someone ready to do that, but others did. And sometimes, that's enough reason to begin.

What I didn't realize at the time was that there are over 4,400 colleges in the U.S. alone, and my students were looking even further — globally. No pressure, right?

My predecessor and I met three times before he sailed into retirement bliss. Meeting No. 1: what's due when.

Meeting No. 2: accounts and logins. Meeting No. 3: a breakdown of the rising seniors, most of which I had to relearn. That was the entirety of my training. I still have the notebook from those meetings, filled with scribbles, arrows, and question marks. Back then, it felt like a secret code into a world where I had no background knowledge. Now, when I flip through those pages, I smile. What once seemed indecipherable has become a second language.

AND JUST LIKE THAT, I WAS 'THE COLLEGE COUNSELOR'

What followed was a blur of learning, laughing, and occasionally panicking. I turned myself into a sponge, soaking up every resource I could find. But the real lessons didn't come from the screen; they came from the students sitting across from me. From their vulnerability. From the moment a quiet student's eyes lit up talking about a future they hadn't yet dared to imagine. From conversations with admission reps who reminded me that this work is, at its heart, about connection and access.

Those first months were humbling: It was just trial, error, and a growing respect for those who had been doing

Being back in the rhythm of a school and helping students with essays, puzzles, and algebraic mysteries started to heal me.

Slowly, I began to remember why I loved this work in the first place: Learning is deeply human and so is guiding it.

this work long before me. Eventually, I realized that college counseling isn't just about checklists or deadlines, but it's about identity, belonging, and belief in the future. It's about helping young people see themselves as authors of their own story.

At my first conferences, I remember watching seasoned counselors greet admission officers like old friends while I tried to remember what half the acronyms meant. But instead of shrinking, I made a promise: I would never stop learning. I would stay humble and curious.

That mindset has carried me farther than I could have imagined. In just five years, I've joined more than



A wall in Kate Trott's office with mementos from college visits.



Kate Trott's office with pennants from college visits.

15 multi-college counselor tours, attended countless fly-ins, and visited over 160 colleges and universities across 23 states, plus the U.K. and Ireland. Every visit reinforces the same truth: There's no substitute for being there. Walking across quads, sitting in lecture halls, chatting with students in dining halls, even occasionally sleeping in dorm rooms — it all deepens my understanding of “fit.” When a student asks, “Would I belong there?” I can answer with honesty, grounded in lived experience.

But it hasn't just been the campus visits that have expanded my knowledge, it's been the people with me on those tours. The friendships and mentorships I've built with other counselors have been some of the most valuable learning experiences of my career. In hotel lobbies, on long bus rides, and over late-night dinners, I've learned more about this profession than any training manual could ever teach. These colleagues have challenged my assumptions, expanded my perspective, and reminded me that professional growth doesn't

happen in isolation, it happens in community. The network of counselors I've met on the road has become one of the most beneficial and sustaining parts of my journey.

Working in a small, rural IB school that draws students from all over the world has expanded that perspective even more. My students apply everywhere; they remind me daily that education is global and opportunity has no borders. To serve them well, I've had to stay open and approach every system and every story with curiosity, empathy, and cultural humility.

Over time, the frantic energy of those early years settled into rhythm. I realized that this profession, like the world our students are stepping into, is constantly changing. Staying effective means staying humble. The moment I think I know it all is the moment I stop truly serving my students.

And while boundaries are important, I've learned that accessibility is essential. I hold evening calls, weekend workshops, and monthly Saturday drop-ins. Sometimes, the most

meaningful conversations happen outside of school hours.

At the heart of everything is a simple belief: Students thrive when they feel seen and supported. My job isn't to dictate their path; it's to walk beside them as they discover it.

One of my favorite quotes is, “Colleges aren't trophies. They are living and learning communities.” That line grounds me. When a student looks at their balanced college list and says, “I'd be happy at any of these,” that's when I know we've done it right.

If I could go back and talk to the version of myself who had just lost her STEAM center, who was tired, uncertain, and questioning her place in education, I'd tell her this: You weren't lost. You were being led somewhere new. 🌈

Kate Trott is the director of college counseling at The Calverton School (MD).



**WE DREAM OF
A WORLD
WHERE PEOPLE
ASPIRE TO
JOIN OUR
MEANINGFUL
PROFESSION.**

***TOGETHER, WE CAN
MAKE THAT A REALITY.***

DONATE

NACAC
National Association for
College Admission Counseling



nacacnet.org

1050 N. Highland St., Suite 400 | Arlington, VA 22201