

OPINION | HIGHER EDUCATION

## Making the College Admissions Process Work for All Students

By Eric Waldo and Jenny Rickard

Apr 5, 2019



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Last month, the higher education landscape was rocked with a widespread college admissions scandal involving wealthy families cheating to gain admission to college for their children. Allegations like this erode public trust in the college admissions process and further disadvantage those applicants who are underrepresented in higher education.

While we share the outrage at the terrible behavior being reported, what's more important is that we not let this sensational story distract us from the structural inequities in higher education. Today only 9 percent of low income students get a college degree by age 24, compared with 73 percent of higher income students, according to a [study](#) by the Pell Institute.

As higher education professionals committed to breaking down the barriers to college and career access, we must acknowledge and confront the obstacles students face when navigating the post-secondary planning process. Here are five ways to do that:

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## **Establish a growth mindset and inspire confidence.**

Before considering a path to post-secondary education, students need help identifying and showcasing their own strengths from an early age. School administrators and teachers can begin this early development through a competency-based framework like the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)), which aims to help students build strong relationships with their counselors and peers that allow them to generate an active interest in learning.

By focusing on developing social and emotional skills early in a student's academic career, schools are setting the stage for future success by helping students learn how to overcome future adversity and instill confidence in their ability.

## **Empower students to value their life experiences.**

Counselors and advisors can also help students think about what their diverse range of experiences can bring to a post-secondary institution. Admissions committees are eager to hear about an applicant's experiences involving family responsibilities outside of the classroom, work obligations, military service, or other details about their personal background.

Harvard University's Graduate School of Education's [Turning the Tide Campaign](#) is a great example of an effort to help underrepresented and low-income students see themselves in a college environment while encouraging university admissions professionals to consider a broader set of experiences when evaluating applicants. Their report suggests reshaping the college admissions process to promote greater ethical engagement and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

## **Invest in those who support students.**

[At 464-to-1](#), the school counselor-to-student ratio impedes the progress of students who have the ability but may lack the encouragement or knowledge to pursue higher education. School counselors are not only an important influence in the lives of students, but research shows that students attending schools with lower counselor-to-student ratios were more engaged in higher-quality college counseling learning decisions, and in turn made more informed college decisions.

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According to [studies](#) from the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), when a school counselor has the bandwidth and resources to provide individualized attention to each student, the student is more likely to be accepted to more colleges and perform better on their standardized tests.

Education technology providers must look at ways in which we can support the workflow of already resource-strapped school counselors. One of the ways in which we're doing this at the Common App is by integrating our service with additional college and career planning services, such as [Cialfo](#), [MaiaLearning](#), [BridgeU](#) and [Folderwave](#) that enable students to navigate the college application process.

Similarly, we have integrated our platform with Google Drive to support file sharing and collaboration between students and counselors with a toolset that many K-12 educators are already familiar with.

### **Provide access to free tools and resources.**

While there are no free resources that can replace the value of investing in high-quality school counselors, there are many high-quality, in-person or virtual mentorship organizations eager to guide students through the application experience and augment the capacity of schools with high counselor-to-student ratios.

Organizations like [Strive for College](#) connects students to a network of near-peer mentors online. Through the [Reach Higher Initiative](#), we offer our [Up Next](#) texting campaign to provide prospective and current college students with technical assistance, deadline reminders, and customized support directly to their mobile devices.

According to the “[160-Character Solution](#),” low-income and minority students who received text messages were more likely to complete the FAFSA and enroll in college immediately after high school than those who didn't receive texts.

The College Board launched its “[Opportunity Scholarships](#),” which will reward students in the class of 2020 with over \$5 million in scholarships simply by completing the college application and applying for FAFSA. Scholarship aggregators like [Scholar Snapp](#), an initiative of the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, allows students to apply to multiple scholarships at once.

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With the Common App, we've provided a streamlined need-based fee waiver for five years, enabling low- and middle-income students to apply to college for free. Our streamlined process has allowed our member institutions like Cornell University to [waive](#) over \$1 million in application fees. Collectively, the Common App membership awarded more than \$65 million in application fee waivers last year.

### **Create a culture where communities celebrate college success.**

Imagine a world where communities celebrate every student pursuing a post-secondary education the same way we celebrate the Super Bowl. That's our goal at Reach Higher, an initiative started by former First Lady Michelle Obama that aims to help more students complete education beyond high school.

Every year on May 1st Reach Higher helps host thousands of [College Signing Day events](#) across the country to celebrate hundreds of thousands of high school seniors who are making a commitment to attend a post-secondary institution. Students, counselors, and communities use this day of action to host rallies lifting up students as the true celebrities, leading to social media channels trending with [#CollegeSigningDay](#) and [#BetterMakeRoom](#).

The American College Application Campaign's [#WhyApply](#) social media campaign similarly helps inspire students to apply to college.

When we build a college-going culture in our schools, communities and social circles, we can truly show young people what's possible. We can change the culture of the college and career planning process from one of complexity and dread to one of simplicity and joy.

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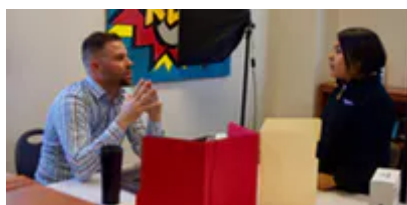


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