

ROADMAP FOR CHANGE

Reimagining US Higher
Education as a Public Good

September 2020

NACAC



OVERVIEW

As those closest to the point of entry between high school and college, members of the National Association for College Admission (NACAC)

believe that, as a society, we have come to a crossroads that demands our careful and immediate attention.

First, as a country, we have drifted away from the idea that higher education should be accessible to all who seek it. Through deliberate policy choices, our nation has deemed higher education to be a private good—one that only benefits the individual. That model is failing. For all Americans to prosper, higher education needs once again to be considered a public good.

Second, as we have slowly turned higher education into a commodity to be bought and sold, we have lost sight of education’s most critical element—the student. Starting now, higher education policy and practice must be developed and implemented with the students’ interests as the foundation of all else.

Finally, aligning higher education with the public good and the interests of students requires us to rethink policies and values across many sectors of our society – including higher education itself, federal and state government, the news media, and communities and families.

The following pages contain excerpts from the NACAC report *Ad Hoc Committee on Leadership in College Admission: Process, Findings, and Recommendations*, which outlines needed changes in the association to empower it to help shape a postsecondary landscape that is accessible, inclusive, equitable and affordable for all. This document takes a much wider view and makes recommendations for transforming the US system of higher education itself.



SUMMARY

Over recent decades, college admission has received extraordinary attention in the news media, as the perceived scarcity of seats in college fuels an unhealthy preoccupation with hyper-selective

colleges that, in turn, distorts the full landscape of admission to higher education in America. The mistaken notion that selectivity equals quality is reinforced and amplified year after year. College rankings. “Operation Varsity Blues.” Billion-dollar industries that feed off the hysteria created selective admission policies to exclude rather than include. Few people know that, on average, four-year colleges accept [67 percent](#) of applicants for admission.

Along the way, we have lost sight of what matters most – ensuring that the system focus on serving all of our nation’s students and serving them well. Our entire educational system, including but not limited to postsecondary education, is inequitable. As such, the system itself is not student-centric at a fundamental level. This must be rectified if we are to provide the opportunity needed to ensure that our nation thrives. Everyone involved in the college admission process—higher education institutions, college admission counseling professionals, policymakers, and all others—must ensure that our entire system remains student-centric because, to state what should be obvious, the purpose of higher education is to educate *students*.

A primary driver of inequities in the U.S. postsecondary system has been a fundamental shift away from higher education as a public good and toward a private good. State and federal governments have increasingly placed the burden of financial survival on the institutions, and the burden of paying for college on individual students, which has created an economic imbalance that further tilts the playing field away from disadvantaged populations. Moreover, this policy shift has created an unstable ‘market’ in which institutions exist, leading serious flaws in maximizing capacity to meet student demand.

As a result of these phenomena, trust in higher education overall has declined. Restoring that trust will involve many people, beginning with those who work at colleges and universities, continuing through those who administer and govern institutions, and including those who create policy at the state and federal levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted virtually every sector of our society and laid bare a range of systemic problems and inequities. But it has also given us the opportunity to rethink all of what we do.

Here are six ways we need to fundamentally change our educational system with the goal of providing equal opportunity for all students to achieve an education beyond high school—

#1: Redesign college admission policy and practice to focus on the centrality of individual students in the vast landscape of postsecondary education. When their interests are not at the forefront of our policies, our educational system cannot succeed.

#2: Emphasize transparency as a critical policy measure to restore trust in higher education, and to ensure good public policy to protect the public investment in education.

#3: Begin basing policy and practice on the premise higher education is a public good and enact public policy that recommits our nation to postsecondary access and success.

#4: Implement policies and practices aimed at rectifying inequitable access at the local/institutional, state, and federal levels. Such work requires that institutional and public policy examine systemic problems in our education system, as neither can effect change without the robust support of the other.

#5: Strengthen policies and practices aimed at protecting students' rights and interests in the transition to postsecondary education.

#6: Implement well-crafted, fully funded public higher education policies at the state and federal level to alleviate uncertainty faced by students and institutions alike.

BUILDING THE ROADMAP FOR CHANGE

Postsecondary education has changed irrevocably between 1937, the year NACAC was incorporated, and the present. Enrollment in postsecondary education has grown by more than 700% since 1947.¹ The “system” of undergraduate higher education in the United States, such as it is, is an assortment of more than 4,000 institutions, that include career and technical, liberal arts, research, and comprehensive colleges; two- and four-year colleges; and public, private, non-profit, and for-profit colleges.² The number of colleges has grown by 118% between 1947 and today. In fact, there is no “system” of higher education in the United States, with the exception of a collection of state higher education systems, some more tightly coordinated than others.

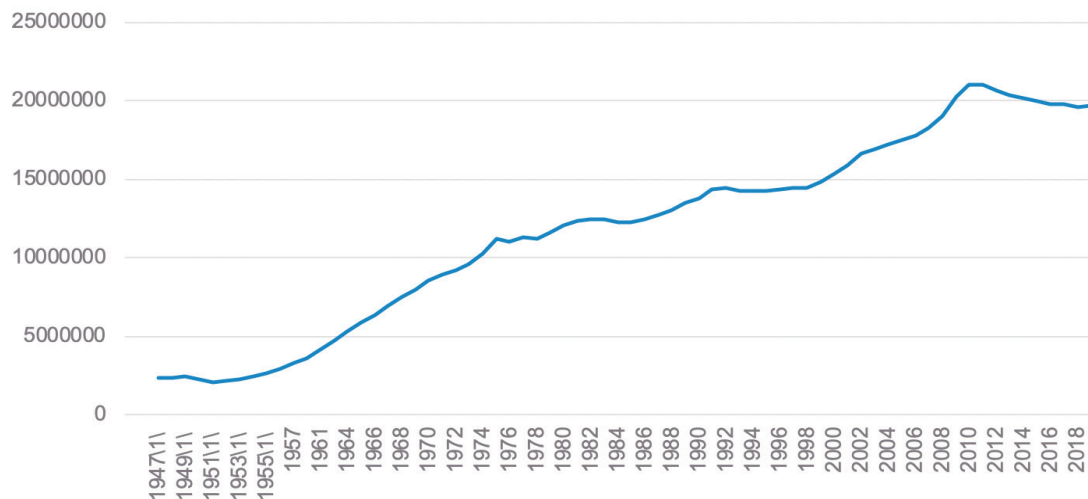
HIGHER EDUCATION AS A MASS MARKET

In fact, there are as many pathways to and through higher ed as there are students. The increase in enrollment has transformed college admission from the small, intimate affair of the early 1900s into a mass market, with billions of dollars at stake and an entire industry centered on matching students with colleges. Standardized admission test agencies alone generate more than \$1 billion in revenue each year. Add to that the test preparation industry, the network of marketing, recruiting, and consulting firms, technology and CRM companies, lead generation companies, and related businesses, and the total soars into the tens of billions. Finally, the imperative of enrolling a sufficient number of students to maintain a sound bottom line generates billions more in tuition and revenue for colleges and universities themselves, much of that now also flowing through public and private student loan providers due to a shift in public policy toward viewing higher education as a private good.

¹ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States; Opening Fall Enrollment in Higher Education, 1963 through 1965; Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities” surveys, 1966 through 1985; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey” (IPEDS-EF:86-99); IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2019, Fall Enrollment component; and Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions Projection Model, 2000 through 2029.

² US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Education Directory, Colleges and Universities, 1949–50 through 1965–66; Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Institutional Characteristics of Colleges and Universities” surveys, 1966–67 through 1985–86; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Institutional Characteristics Survey” (IPEDS-IC:86-99); and IPEDS Fall 2000 through Fall 2018, Institutional Characteristics component.

Total Enrollment, United States Postsecondary Education, 1947–2019



Recommendation #1: Redesign college admission policy and practice to focus on the centrality of individual students in the vast landscape of postsecondary education. When their interests are not at the forefront of our policies, our educational system cannot succeed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIABLE, ACCURATE INFORMATION

As with any mass market, information asymmetry between colleges and students, compounded by the lack of access to school counselors and college advisors, creates an environment in which students and families must navigate processes often beyond their ability to fathom. In the previous decade alone, state and federal governments have created new resources or overhauled rules pertaining to basic college information (the Department of Education’s “College Scorecard”), student loan disclosures, financial aid award letters, misrepresentation, and high-pressure sales tactics in admission and recruitment. In the private sector, the market for college information remains robust. College rankings transformed from the domain of a few entrenched publications to a cottage industry involving online lead generators, lifestyle magazines, and information providers that span

the range of expertise and interests. In short, the ‘market’ for college information is vast and still marked by a significant caveat emptor.

Recommendation #2: Emphasize transparency as a critical policy measure to restore trust in higher education, and to ensure good public policy to protect the public investment in education.

THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The market for college information is robust because the value of a postsecondary degree remains high. The payoff includes higher earnings; more participation in civic society; greater efficacy in political and personal life; greater satisfaction with life; and a host of other benefits. And society benefits from citizens with advanced education – more skills, greater political engagement, better earnings (and therefore taxes), improved self-sufficiency, less imprisonment, and reduced need for some social safety net programs.³

Recommendation #3: Begin basing policy and practice on the premise higher education is a public good and enact public policy that commits our nation to postsecondary access and success.

³ College Board, Trends in Higher Education Series: “Education Pays,” December 2019.

INEQUITABLE ACCESS

Yet while many Americans view higher education—and education overall—as both a means for upward mobility and a public good, our public policy has not corrected for calcified social stratification and has increasingly treated postsecondary education as a private good. As a result, and despite passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the equity gap in education overall remains stubbornly persistent, and the increased cost of attending college threatens to shut more students out of higher education. Yet the college admission counseling profession is still confronted by those who believe that students' race and ethnicity are immaterial to the college admission decision, and who refuse to acknowledge the systemic prejudice engrained in our education systems, beginning well before students reach college. Further exacerbating equity in higher education, state and federal support have declined per capita as a significant share of the increase in enrollment is attributable to low-income students, placing further demands on many institutions' ability to support students with financial assistance.⁴

Recommendation #4: Implement policies and practices aimed at rectifying inequitable access at the local/institutional, state, and federal levels. Such work requires that institutional and public policy examine systemic problems in our education system, as neither can effect change without the robust support of the other.

THE PROBLEM WITH VIEWING HIGHER ED AS A 'PRIVATE GOOD'

This 'private good' orientation for higher education has stranded postsecondary institutions in a no-man's-land, where they must compete and generate revenue as if they are selling private goods yet are governed

and regulated as if they are public entities. The long-festering debate over the allocation of institutional aid dollars, for instance, is a predictable outgrowth of a public policy orientation in the US that lacks a clear or adequate baseline for our collective investment in making college affordable for any student who seeks it. State and federal governments undeniably invest billions of dollars in postsecondary education but demand far outstrips supply.

Even for privileged families, the high cost of postsecondary education is beginning to create doubt that the value is worth the cost. Worse, unscrupulous colleges—at times sanctioned by state and federal governments—prey on vulnerable students, with predictably disastrous results, further damaging people's trust in higher education and depleting our scarce public resources.⁵

As if to emphasize the commercial nature of college admission, the Department of Justice investigation into NACAC's code of ethics on restraint-of-trade grounds has resulted in an irreversible change in direction for NACAC—one that seems destined to move us beyond a role in which we self-regulate, to one in which we must advocate and rely on our core values to represent what is good and noble in higher ed admission, while also naming what is wrong and detrimental.

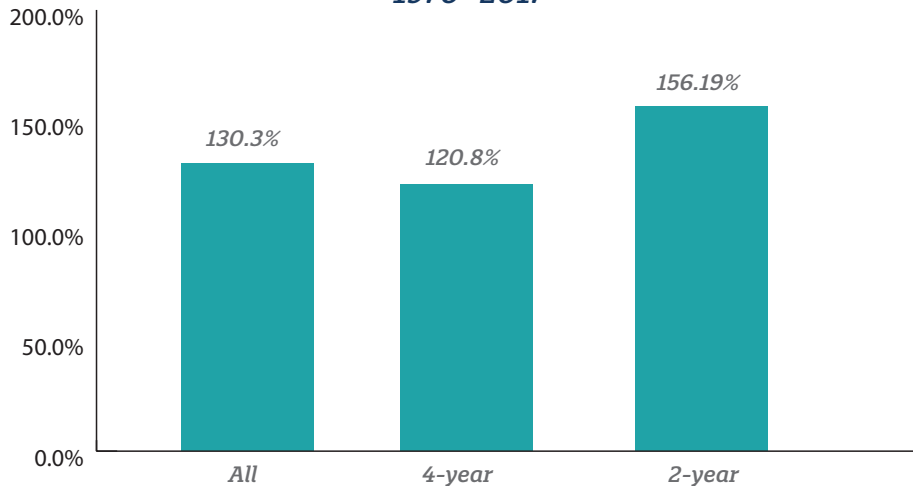
Recommendation #5: Strengthen policies and practices aimed at protecting students' rights and interests in the transition to postsecondary education.

Whether this commercial orientation persists, however, remains to be seen. As it currently stands, the legitimacy of higher education rests on its ability to convey a high-quality education to as many students as are interested in receiving it. Resting our nation's future on a simple commercial premise is not likely to achieve our goal.

⁴ Funding Down, Tuition Up," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 2016; downloaded from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/funding-down-tuition-up>

⁵ See: "For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success," Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, July 30, 2012. https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/for_profit_report/PartI-PartIII-SelectedAppendixes.pdf

Enrollment Growth at Postsecondary Institutions, 1970–2017



UNCERTAINTY AND INSTABILITY

The modern era of college admission has been marked by uncertainty. The mass market of higher ed has fostered a commercial, commodified view of admission to college in much of the popular conscience. Increased competition among colleges and technological changes have prompted unprecedented numbers of applications for admission from students, which in turn has created immense uncertainty among colleges. Yield rates at four-year colleges have endured a sustained decline, causing them to struggle to find new ways to fill seats while working with budgets that do not keep pace with needs. Colleges and students each play roles in upping the ante, as many colleges seek ever-increasing application numbers and lower acceptance rates, while advantaged students match their moves with countermoves of their own.

In contrast, enrollment in public two-year colleges has increased 160% since 1970. In fact, the growth in two-year enrollment overall has outpaced the growth in four-year enrollment since 1970.⁶

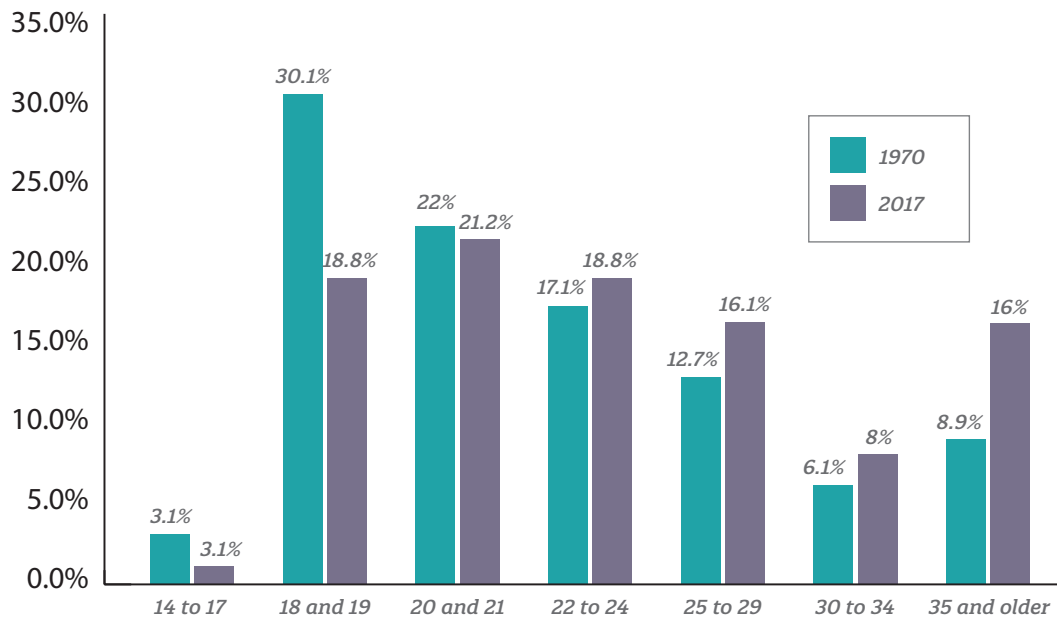
In addition, the “average” college student was significantly older in 2017 than in 1970, signifying a shift toward college as a form of lifelong learning and away from college as the exclusively residential, four-year experience.⁷ College has also become more portable, as millions of students transfer credits from one institution to another during their postsecondary experience, either vertical (2- to 4-year), lateral (2- to 2-year or 4- to 4-year), or reverse transfer (4- to 2-year).

Recommendation #6: Implement well-crafted, fully funded public higher education policies at the state and federal level to alleviate uncertainty faced by students and institutions alike.

⁶ See: “For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success,” Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, July 30, 2012. https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/for_profit_report/PartI-PartIII-SelectedAppendixes.pdf

⁷ SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities” surveys, 1970 and 1980; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), “Fall Enrollment Survey” (IPEDS-EF:90-99); IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2018, Fall Enrollment component; and Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions Projection Model, 2000 through 2028. U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October, selected years, 1970 through 2017.

Percent Enrollment in Postsecondary Education By Age, 1970 and 2017



CONCLUSION

Since the transformation of our higher education system will require the active engagement of *all* stakeholders, NACAC is committed to transforming itself to identify changes that we and our members can make directly and to advocate for changes that extend beyond our reach. Recommendations for those changes are featured in the report that served as a source for this document, *Ad Hoc Committee on Leadership in College Admission: Process, Findings, and Recommendations*.

NACAC will pursue this transformation in pursuit of the public good with determination and resolve, as the collective benefit to us all cannot be realized without it.

The recent Department of Justice investigation of NACAC’s ethical code, grounded in the commercial concept of ‘restraint of trade,’ has now moved the association beyond a role in which we self-regulate to one in which we must advocate and rely on our core values to represent what is good and noble about higher education, while also naming what is wrong and detrimental. In so doing, we will start by challenging the premise that higher education is a form of commerce, but rather that it is a public good and should be treated as such.

Our association will do everything in its power to ensure that counselors have the appropriate resources they need to advise students on their journey, and that higher education is funded and supported in a way that ensures that every student who aspires to postsecondary education has an equitable opportunity to do so.