Ad Hoc Committee to Establish Guidance for the Workplace Well-Being of Professionals and Office Culture

Committee Co-Chairs

Ashley Araya, University of California, Riverside

Michael Cartusciello, Lesley University (MA)

Committee Members

Kimberly Benns, La Salle University (PA)

Phoebe Blaisdell, Pomona College (CA)

Tanya Cummings, St. John's School (TX)

Mike Drish, Vanderbilt University (TN)

Scott Garbini, Garbini Education and Career Consulting LLC (CT)

Sara-Jean Gilbert, Illinois College

Robin Hamilton, Occidental College (CA)

Amanda Henry, Whitfield School (MO)

Marcelle Hicks, New York Institute of Technology

Aziza Janmohamed, Rice University (TX)

Katarina Ng, The Steppingstone Foundation (MA)

Laura Romer, University of Oregon

Wintress Ross, University of South Carolina

Carly Valenzuela, Springside Chestnut Hill Academy (PA)
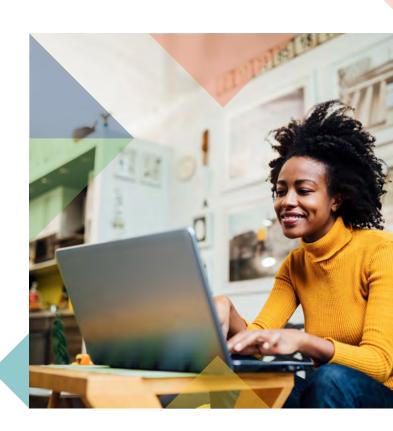
NACAC Staff Liaisons

Helen Hernandez, Assistant Director, Executive & Board Relations

Kara Lackmann, Manager, People & Culture Initiatives

Ashley Perzyna, Chief Operating Officer

Committee Purpose

The purpose of this benchmarking exercise is to improve the general well-being of college admission professionals. NACAC's members will benefit from accessing current guidance and research related to overall workplace well-being in secondary and postsecondary professional settings.

This committee was charged with:

- Working with industry and NACAC advisors to identify current benchmarking guidance, systemic reviews of secondary and postsecondary staffing needs, workload estimates, and successful/promising models for optimal staffing.

- Building a foundation of research, best practices, and existing standards upon which NACAC can build a body of knowledge and/or toolkit for the future.

- Providing recommendations to NACAC and its member institutions for how to address and support the well-being of professionals.

Committee Recommendations

The committee began its work in October 2023, convening every two weeks to discuss relevant readings, reports, and data, as well as hear from NACAC content experts. In considering the committee's purpose, the group immediately expressed discomfort in dictating staffing needs and models as every institution and organization is different — possessing internal dynamics to which the committee was not privy. For this reason, the committee determined to focus its attention on addressing questions two and three.

In the committee's deliberations, it became clear that regardless of institutional or organizational cultural practices and/or expressions of employee wellness, those with admission/counseling responsibilities may not have access to such benefits within their respective departments. College admission counseling professionals experience extraordinary pressure due to circumstances beyond their control, such as institutional financial/enrollment demands, understaffed and under-resourced departments, students experiencing mental health challenges, expectations of parents and families, political and economic headwinds, and more. Often, admission and counseling offices become fraught with tension to overcome these challenges, coming at a personal cost to professionals.

NACAC data and historic member-centered reports validate the committee's observations. The notion of workplace well-being is not new. However, connecting the volumes of management/business best practices related to well-being with the college admission counseling profession evolved to become the primary purpose of the committee. Building the foundation and naming these best practices serves as a call of action of leaders in the field of counseling, admission, enrollment management, and beyond — that the extraordinary pressure felt by professionals is not only mentally and emotionally unsustainable but creates toxic conditions that drive people out of organizations as well as the profession.

This report and its recommendations are a roadmap for improving college admission counseling professional well-being in the workplace as well as sustaining a culture that supports an individual's whole self. Employee well-being is part and parcel of a positive culture. It would be a tremendous disservice to the work of the committee and its synthesis of nearly 10 years of NACAC literature if this report sat on a shelf.

College admission counseling professionals experience extra-ordinary pressure due to circumstances beyond their control.

Recommendations for best practices relied and built upon important pieces of NACAC data and reports. The committee believes that its report, in addition to the nearly decade-long catalog of content, provides ample foundation for its explicit recommendations about ways to improve well-being and transform office culture. NACAC data and reports providing the basis for the committee's recommendations are:

- NACAC Member Needs Assessment Report (2017 & 2022)

- Career Paths for Admissions Officers: A Survey Report (2014)

- Ad Hoc Committee on Next Generation College Counseling and Admission Professionals (2022)

- Elevate Equity 2023

Key takeaways of the NACAC Member Needs Assessment Report (2017 & 2022):

- In 2022, 43 percent of survey respondents reported burnout among counseling and admission professionals as the top challenge faced in the industry. In 2017, the top challenge was increasing complexity and/or competition in the admission process (66 percent). That same year, the second challenge was acquiring and retaining quality employees (29 percent).

- Burnout is a struggle among all ethnicities, however, it was reported as the greatest challenge by participants serving under-represented and specialty student populations in 2022.

- In both 2017 and 2022, acceptable work/life balance is the primary personal challenge for survey respondents (51 and 38 percent, respectively). In 2022, the other top challenges were mental health needs of students (25 percent), understaffing (22 percent), and over- or under-involved parents (22 percent). In 2017, the other top challenges were lack of resources (38 percent), meeting enrollment goals (23 percent), and ability to recruit/retain qualified professionals (17 percent).

Key takeaways of the Career Paths for Admissions Officers: A Survey Report (2014):

- Lack of information about a career path and concerns about work/life balance, among other factors, make many feel undecided about staying in the field. Admission counselors were most likely to be seeking a career opportunity within three years, and of those, 24 percent planned to look outside of the admission field and 43 percent were unsure about staying in admission.

- Important resources that can make a difference include on-the-job training, professional development, and mentoring.

- While admission operations are asked to do more, funds for hiring, promotion, and compensation policies have been cut at many institutions, making staff retention more difficult.

- Many young professionals say they don't get enough exposure to national and regional conferences — those that do consider these experiences highly valuable.

Key takeaways of the Ad Hoc Committee on Next Generation College Counseling and Admission Professionals (2022):

- Articulate the value of and provide best practices for networking and collect data to understand the career experiences of new professionals.

- Create onboarding materials designed around four topic areas institutions could use with new staff members: transitioning to a new profession, introduction to the college admission field, professional development, and self-care investment.

- Finalize postsecondary frontline individual contributor framework and develop clarity on the key skills and job duties outlined in the framework.

Key takeaways of Elevate Equity 2023:

- This convening, interconnected with the NACAC, NASFAA, and Lumina Foundation report titled *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access*, documented the challenges admission offices face in diversifying the workforce and cultivating future leaders.

- Event participants overwhelmingly cited downward pressure on admission salaries and budgets, particularly in the face of increasing professional demand, as a barrier to hiring and retaining new professionals in general, but especially for hiring a diverse workforce.

- Deepen the talent pipeline by aligning hiring policy and process with institutional DEI goals. Moreover, participants noted that a secondary effect of diversifying the composition of the admission office would be that the new cultural norms and expectations could help re-shape office norms and practices.

Other important data and management/business content reviewed and considered for the purpose of the committee's report includes but was not limited to:

- The CUPA-HR 2023 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey
  (source: https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/higher-ed-employee-retention-survey-findings-september-2023/)

- Deloitte Insights. *The Workforce Wellbeing Imperative: Paving the way for human sustainability in the workplace culture*
  (source: https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/topics/talent/employee-wellbeing.html)

- LeaderFactor. *The Complete Guide to Psychological Safety*
  (source: https://www.leaderfactor.com/resource-guides)

Summary of Committee's Recommendations

The committee built upon a pre-established foundation of literature, data, and reports from NACAC, industry, and associated management/business organizations in drafting its recommendations. The committee's underlying motivations included:

- The best practices established in this report should not be limited to "either side of the table," namely secondary counselors or college admission officers. The committee embraced the notion of bringing all NACAC member constituents to the table.

- Given the frequent turnover of management/leadership, especially in the college admission offices, that responsibility lies with all levels of employees to create systemic cultural change — individual, manager, and greater organization. The committee believes that the best practices established in this report are not mutually exclusive and can apply to all member types.

- The same benefits, flexibility, and commitment to well-being are imperative for professionals to serve in these mission-critical roles. Professionals cannot sustain the extraordinary burden of internal and external pressures without managers and organizations creating conditions that support a college admission counselor's holistic well-being.

- A simple framework of "4 P's" creates a roadmap for how individuals, managers, and organizations can support employees with college admission counseling responsibilities.

- NACAC has a role to play in providing important management and leadership training to build the capacity, knowledge, and resource-toolkit of those seeking advancement in the profession, related to well-being and positive office culture.

The time is now for leaders in the college admission counseling profession to take inspired action to uplift the individual well-being of professionals and create and sustain a positive culture in the many spaces those in the profession occupy. Nearly a decade of NACAC data, research, and reports articulate the immense mental and emotional burden carried by those who do this work. Taking action today ensures the retention and growth of the workforce of tomorrow.

Recommendations for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations

Defining Well-Being

What is well-being?	What does it mean in action?	How is well-being measured?
In the context of the college admission counseling profession, holistic well-being refers to a state of emotional, psychological, and physical safety.	An employee is able to fully engage in the workplace with a clear sense of purpose and as their authentic self. An organization with a positive culture is one that prioritizes the personal and professional well-being of employees through both policies and practices.	The committee articulated four indicators of well-being in a counseling/admission office setting: **People:** How offices are comprised and how staff members are prepared for their roles. **Pay:** Employment is an agreement or contract for services for fair compensation and benefits. **Practices:** Relationships and expectations of employee to students, employee to colleagues, and employee to supervisors/management. **Pathways:** The written and unwritten, spoken and unspoken rules of upward progression.

People

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Optimal Staffing As there are many factors that play into secondary and post-secondary staffing responsibilities; optimal staffing and caseloads will look different at each institution.	Understand your job description. Maintain a record of additional work being completed outside of your normal role: - Temporary responsibilities while a colleague is on leave. Understand your own personal boundaries and know how to say no when being asked to do work outside of your role. Help facilitate an open discussion with your supervisor.	Leadership should map out organizational charts that account for business needs, balanced workloads, peer institution benchmarking, and staff skill set. Departments must strive to have teams fully staffed, including leadership positions and temporary leave positions. This can be done through prioritizing budget alignment to departmental needs, recruitment, and hiring practices.	Organizational self-assessment, analysis, and comparisons should be done on an annual basis by the leadership. Organizations looking to grow enrollment must account for future staffing needs and allot future budget funds to create new positions to meet the demands in advance.
Caseloads and Responsibilities When determining optimal caseloads, an important consideration is that there are many ways to complete the same tasks and managers/ leaders should work with each individual to determine their zone of peak performance.	Maintain a record of the average time it takes to complete projects and responsibilities, as well as how much time they require on a daily/monthly/annual schedule. Negotiate a manageable quota with your supervisor using this information.	Staff should receive clear job descriptions that outline the expectations of the workload prior to hiring. Having a clear and transparent understanding of the role will ensure that staff feel equipped on how to succeed in their role. The job description should also include work from home and in-office work expectations. Leadership must update and maintain relevant job descriptions on a timely, ongoing basis with feedback from the individual in that job. Managers or leadership should be proactive and communicative when assigning an employee a new or major responsibility. Conversations regarding concerns, extra compensation, and reprioritization should be addressed prior to a change in responsibility. A proactive approach will ensure clarity in one's role and responsibility.	An annual analysis and comparison should take into consideration staff input, task identification, time tracking, peak/ seasonal periods, historical data, and market trends. In cases where organizations determine that workload assignments are to be based on individual staff skill sets, this should be made clear to all staff in the department so as to promote transparency and equity.
Onboarding In order to promote a culture of well-being during the orientation process, organizations must provide new hires with a structured and intentional orientation process.	Maintain a hard copy of your job description on day one. Familiarize yourself with institutional pathways, such as salary tiers, promotion criteria, as well as office policy and "unspoken" cultural expectations.	Accessible check lists providing clarity of all that needs to be covered. Direction on who staff can speak to for onboarding questions. Provide opportunities for peer mentoring Establish a clear understanding of what a promotion pathway looks like for their role. Create a welcoming environment for new employees that prioritizes their individual identities, for example, sharing preferred pronouns in advance of a new employee's arrival.	Documented guidelines of policies and practices for employees to reference. Clear definition of the role for staff to feel empowered to take ownership of the position. Provide employees with ergonomically sound and updated technology that enables the employee to perform in their physical environment.

People

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Training and Professional Development Counseling and admission offices should sponsor or host ongoing training programs throughout the year, as well as an annual staff training/retreat. This builds camaraderie with colleagues and an understanding of how one's role supports the mission of the organization. It also supports individuals in staying up to date with the ever-changing landscape of college access and success, and supports continuous learning in the profession.	Seek out training/professional development opportunities outside of your organization. Identify areas of interest and/or improvement for yourself and advocate for opportunities to enhance those skills.	When planning training programming, be mindful to select content that has been both requested by the team and is reflective of the team, that the sessions aren't repetitive, and that training includes non-work-related items such as team building, financial health, cultural competency, and self-care. When possible, also engage staff in identifying budget-friendly ideas that would provide professional development or other meaningful things that would improve their well-being/workplace satisfaction.	When possible, organizations should have a designated individual who can lead these efforts and provide these resources to staff. Organizations should look to create specialized training programs for leadership to improve their communication skills and be effective managers. Organizations should allocate budget funds for staff to attend conferences, networking opportunities with colleagues, or other performance development opportunities outside the institution. Clear guidelines should be established for when and how employees can utilize these resources. Organizations should provide anti-bias and diversity training for all staff.
Performance Reviews and Manager Check-ins Performance conversations should take place year-round. However, formal performance reviews should be implemented on an annual basis. An employee should have the opportunity to provide feedback on the working environment.	Employees should feel empowered to request a check-in. Proactively seeking feedback from your manager and team. Develop comfort in providing feedback to your manager.	Meet individually with their supervisees monthly or quarterly and follow up with written instruction when necessary. - For new employees, it's recommended to meet weekly or bi-weekly. Gather feedback on their culture of wellness, open communication, trust, empathy, goal setting, accountability, and professional development. Be receptive to receiving information that can help them confront issues that prevent the team from reaching its full potential. Remember that feedback should be given constructively with suggestions for improvement. Provide staff with check-in opportunities with a non-supervisor, such as a peer mentor.	All performance reviews should allow for a review of both the supervisor and the employee. To ensure transparency in the evaluation process, the metrics should be provided in advance, ideally during the onboarding process.

Practices

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Supportive Management The characteristics of supportive management are transparency, trust, and empathy. A supportive manager is one who is consistently present in the relationship, promotes kindness, encourages open communication, and contributes to the work.	Try and get ahead on the work of self-reflection. - Know your communication style. - Identify and record strengths and weaknesses. - Take time to reflect after major transitions/projects.	Demonstrate respect and trust for employees to show that you have their best interests at heart. When a supervisor has modeled empathy and practiced active listening well, employees feel safe going to their supervisor to say they are struggling and need assistance. An open line of communication allows for employee input on policies and procedures where possible and shared agreements about what communication looks like in practice. Even with clear expectations and timelines there may be times when a supervisor may encounter difficult conversations with staff. Building a foundation of trust and respect will help your managers motivate staff and develop a mutual understanding of next steps.	Empathy and trust need to penetrate throughout the organization in order to promote an environment of psychological safety. Organizations should provide resources, toolkits, guidance, and training for supervisors and leadership on how to manage effectively, how to advocate for their staff, how to promote healthy boundaries and well-being, and how to communicate effectively.
Balance and Flexibility An office culture that prioritizes employee well-being is one that promotes balance and flexibility. It achieves this through facilitating reciprocal connections between staff and management/leadership, embedding trust and accountability, advocating for accommodations, and emphasizing responsibility. Staff today seek a workplace that allows for maximum flexibility. This includes in-office work and work from home availability, that provides staff with greater autonomy over their schedule, and recognizes paid time off is a necessity for physical and emotional well-being.	Be prepared for plans to change. Practice giving grace and flexibility to colleagues and managers.	Leadership should destigmatize and simplify the process for requesting time off, should provide clear directives on what goes into approving it, and set an example by taking off time themselves. Leadership should be mindful of burnout during and following these "black out" dates and provide compensatory time or flexible scheduling. Expectations must be established to empower staff to accomplish day-to-day tasks and meet position objectives from their work location. Recognizing that the college and admission counseling profession requires meeting with students, families, colleagues and other constituents, consider a rotational structure, virtual summers or flexibility that allows staff to come in when needed. When positions allow, staff should be encouraged to work with supervisors on setting flexible core hours that account for family life, create space for those seeking advanced degrees, and/or other activities that nurture personal and professional growth.	When organizations have to set limitations on time off requests during busy seasons (events, travel recruitment, and read season, (for example) staff should be informed during the hiring and onboarding process of these policies. Organizations need to be performing remote work analyses for all positions and document the metrics that determine the outcome for fully remote, in person, or hybrid allowances.

Practices

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Assessing Culture Leadership should monitor the organizational culture as this is an indicator of future success, retention, and employee satisfaction.	Change can happen anywhere — and go bottom up. Individuals can/should invest and commit to bettering the organization. Culture is going to happen with or without you. Your contributions are necessary!	A manager can always take responsibility for leading the culture of their direct team. Management and leadership should advocate for all voices to be at the table to ensure policy conversations are inclusive of all perspectives. Practice skills such as listening and collecting data/surveys, and invest in EQ training and management skills.	Staff at all levels should be encouraged and feel fully empowered to share their thoughts and ideas without fear of retribution. The organization should create community through aligning individual roles with the organization's mission to provide employees with a greater sense of purpose. The organization can also create staff unity through social events, team meetings, and group projects.

Pay

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Compensation Philosophy The committee recommends that transparent conversations regarding pay and future increases be implemented into both the hiring and onboarding process.	Know your worth. Develop knowledge and clarity of geographical, institutional, and industry contexts for salary expectations. Spark conversations with supervisors. Be aware of the organization's compensation philosophy so that the manager knows you care and will be ready to talk about it when the time comes. Be open to and flexible with drivers for your non-cash compensation — additional PTO, creative benefits, etc.	When bonuses, raises, or financial awards are allowable, staff should be well informed on how to qualify for these. Managers should feel empowered to advocate for and offer support to the team. Develop knowledge of market, industry, and unique institutional rates for positions before hiring periods, negotiations, etc.	Organizations should maintain and promote a clearly articulated compensation structure. Organizations must perform a fair compensation/market rate analysis on a regular basis to determine employee salaries by job title, years of experience, competencies of the role, performance expectations, inflation and cost of living needs. Although many organizations may not have readily available institutional data to pull for an equity and market rate analysis, this cannot be the justification for not performing one. Organizations should explore online higher education salary surveys, explore job postings, check government sources, and consult with peers at other institutions and human resources professionals. Be sure to take into account the financial impact of location and the cost of living for remote employees (especially regionally placed recruiters). The market rate analysis, the factors included, final salary decisions for all organizational positions, and pathways to salary increases should be shared with departmental staff.

Pay

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Equity When developing the market rate analysis, pay equity must be a consideration.	Challenge biases that may exist due to employee's race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion or other non-job-related factors.	Honor intercultural competencies and compensate multilingual staff for their added skillset. In response to the high turnover seen in the admission profession, extra compensation must be provided and agreed upon to any staff tasked with additional work due to the position vacancies. As travel expectations for staff continue to be paramount for student recruitment, managers must be conscientious of how this could impact staff wellness. They should ensure that road runners have institutional credit cards, per diems have been periodically researched, and when they can't be avoided reimbursements are processed immediately. Staff, especially those early in their careers, cannot be expected to cover these expenses.	Challenge biases that may exist due to employee's race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion or other non-job-related factors.

Benefits
 	
To promote and sustain a culture of holistic employee wellness, a comprehensive benefits package
		Ensure that new employees understand the organization's benefits policies.
		
		Educate team members about policy changes or new offerings.
		
		Encourage your team to utilize PTO.
			The organization, at a minimum, should provide comprehensive health insurance —physical, dental, vision.
			
			Retirement planning.
			
			Paid time off and leave opportunities.
			
			   - Family leave
			
			When salary increases conflict with budget allowances, organizations should explore creative fringe benefits:
			
			   - Free or discounted advancement degrees
			
			   - Discounted housing
			
			   - Reimbursement for remote work expenses
			
			   - Student loan forgiveness
			
			   - Trainings or other classes
			
			Due to the nature of the college admission counseling profession, many staff work over 40 hours a week, evenings, and/or weekends. Organizations should implement formal or informal compensatory time off for salaried employees or implement flexible arrangements to prevent burn out.

Pathways

Thematic Area	Individual	Manager	Organization
Transparent Pathways To keep top talent, reduce recruitment costs, motivate staff, and promote a culture of well-being, organizations must create clear pathways for internal promotions and advancement.		Managers must clearly identify the department's needs, thus ensuring pathways are feasible. These pathways and plans must be defined for the employee early in their career and revisited with the individual periodically to track the employee's progress within their plan. When considering pathways for direct reports, understand not all pathways are vertical. Take into consideration staff skill sets, goals, and passions. Provide growth opportunities for staff who may not want to supervise others. Supervisors should proactively talk about salary and promotions during the onboarding, in one-on-one meetings, and in annual meetings. Managers should also meet with their staff individually to discuss employee's passions and goals in order to assist them in attaining this professional growth, whether that is within the organization or not.	The organization's Human Resources Department should promote internal opportunities for advancement and define how promotions are determined. Organizations must consider implementing vertical promotions, horizontal promotions, and dry promotions within their plan. When exploring vertical promotion pathways at your institution, consider a multi-step ladder model to help avoid the "up or out" mentality when openings are not available. These pathways and plans must be defined for the employee early in their career and revisited with the individual periodically to track the employee's progress within their plan. Additionally, take into consideration staff skill sets, goals, and passions, as not all staff may want to or be responsible for managing others. Supporting professional growth should also take place outside of one's individual organization. Organizations should encourage staff to be active in professional organizations, network with colleagues in the field, and attend conferences.
Mentoring Organizations must establish both formal and informal mentoring programs.	Actively seek out others who can serve as an advisor, mentor, and/or sponsor. Consider someone outside of your organization; reflect on your peers, colleagues, and network.	When developing mentoring programs, consider the following: career advancement, leadership development, diversity and inclusion, knowledge sharing, and learning and support. Provide all staff with shadowing opportunities in other roles to better understand the institution as a whole. If you choose not to make participation for all staff a requirement, be sure to engage staff at all levels of the organization. Pairing your staff early during the onboarding process with peers or senior leadership will assist their transition and highlight your culture of employee wellness.	When developing mentoring programs, consider the following: career advancement, leadership development, diversity and inclusion, knowledge sharing, and learning and support. Embed a positive culture at the organization to help prevent drastic changes from team to team during times of transition.

Recommendations for NACAC

As the professional home of the college admission counseling profession, the committee recommends that NACAC take the following steps to build the capacity of middle managers, cultivate the specific and necessary skill set of people management, and deepen resources available to individuals who seek continued career advancement. While there are many generalized resources, products, and services to address the aforementioned in the marketplace, the committee seeks profession-specific content and calls upon NACAC to create:

- A profession-specific manager development training program and on-demand resources.

- A middle management SIG.

- A mentorship space and resources to build one's own personal board of directors.

- A conference experience specifically for middle management to build and leverage networks.

- A database of professional development resources and opportunities.