

A Declaration of Values to Guide a Profession

Preamble:

A new definition of academic excellence is needed in the United States. It should be more inclusive, more focused on student needs and more dedicated to “developing talent” instead of “selecting for talent” in the admissions process. To that end, we offer 10 principles to guide admissions, financial aid and school counseling professionals.

We believe that:

- I. **Education is essential in this new century.** Unlike the 20th century, in this new world a college-educated citizenry is vital to the well-being of the United States. A college education (two- or four-year) should be within the reach of everyone. To meet this goal, educators need to improve both high school and college graduation rates and recognize that unequal educational opportunities for some students require extraordinary responses from us all.
- II. **Institutional diversity is one of our greatest assets.** The strength of American higher education lies in its diversity: All sectors of higher education have important roles to play in responding to the nation's educational challenges. The diversity of our system and the many missions pursued by some 4,000 accredited, nonprofit, two- and four-year colleges and universities are essential to this diverse nation.
- III. **Education is a process, not a product.** The profession (made up of admissions and financial aid officers and school counselors) understands education to be a process, not a product, and students to be learners, not clients or customers. Competition and commercialism in our environment should not deter us from our educational goals and values.
- IV. **The school-to-college transition should be seen as a learning opportunity.** At its best, admission is about “fit” between student and institution. The profession encourages students and parents to see college admission as part of an educational learning process, one that encourages student exploration, autonomy, responsibility and maturity.
- V. **Student preparation must be improved.** We believe that schools and colleges and universities should collaborate to make a college-preparatory curriculum the “default” curriculum for every student, beginning in eighth grade, with planning starting in middle school. The content standards reflected in Achieve's “American Diploma Project,” the Advanced Placement® and International Baccalaureate programs and the College Board Standards for College Success™ are all good places to start building rigorous curricula that prepare all students for college enrollment and success.
- VI. **School-university partnerships are essential and should be expanded and strengthened.** The profession encourages school-university partnerships to improve academic preparation, foster student aspiration and provide early awareness programs for all students — especially for first-generation college students and their families.
- VII. **Professional norms must govern student admission.** The profession insists that colleges and universities should commit to 1) providing concise information about their programs and requirements; 2) presenting themselves clearly, forthrightly and accurately; 3) selecting students using valid and equitable methods; and 4) using test results in accordance with professional norms and expectations (see Appendix B for the College Board's guidelines on responsible use of admissions examinations).

VIII. Financial aid processes should be simplified and focused.

The profession believes that financial aid processes (at the institutional, state and federal levels) need to be simplified and made more coherent and predictable, with the goal of minimizing confusion on the part of students and families. The profession also believes that merit aid, particularly when financed publicly by regressive taxes or lotteries, has to clear a very high bar before it can justify itself as appropriate student aid.

IX. Access to “success,” not simply access, must be the goal.

As the College Board’s CollegeKeys Compact™ emphasized, admission is a hollow promise without financial aid and sustainable academic support. The profession believes that all institutions and faculty must be dedicated to the success of students once they are admitted. The institutional aspiration should be that all students succeed in attaining the goals they set for themselves upon enrollment, e.g., a training certificate, successful transfer to a four-year institution or an associate or bachelor’s degree.

X. College rankings must be revisited.

The profession urges the College Board to convene a panel of experts (including educators, statisticians, sociologists and students of organizational behavior) to explore the validity, reliability and value of existing rankings and suggest, if necessary, new ways of providing better information to students and the general public. What the profession needs are accurate and educationally defensible assessments that focus on outcomes and help students and the public understand institutional value and functioning, without minimizing the importance of diversity or distorting institutional purposes.

We are convinced that this 10-part statement draws on the best in our past, while providing a grounded agenda for our profession in a new century. We hope that, whether in a school or a college or a university, you will be able to use this statement with your faculty and institutional leadership as an ongoing guide to renew the institutional discussion about the school-to-college transition and launch a conversation about student success.

Far from serving as lofty, unattainable goals, these values represent our firm expectations. Many institutions are already making these expectations real. What matters at least as much as the destination is an unflinching commitment to the journey and to excellence in meeting the needs of students.

We believe that the success of our profession in the years ahead must be judged against the extent to which these values serve as guides to action. With these values in place, we can remain true to the best in our past; without them, we can easily lose sight of our mission and purpose.

Implications of These Principles

To us, these principles appear to lead inexorably to a new way of looking at the school-to-college transition: They imply that:

- students, understanding the admissions process as a learning opportunity, will take greater responsibility for their own transition;
- school counselors and teachers will be thinking about college preparation from the middle school on, while practically all high school students will be enrolled in curricula designed to put them on the path to college;
- financial aid processes will be simpler, clearer and more predictable;
- the greatest resources will be directed toward K-12 students in need of the greatest assistance;
- test results will be used appropriately in the admissions process and, because assessment outcomes will be related to educational values, there will be less temptation to “game” indicators in order to improve institutional standing and prestige; and
- our profession will continue to rest on the foundation of ethical practice long promoted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the College Board, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators and others.