



Reimagining College Fairs for Equity:

The Role of High Schools and Postsecondary Education

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College fairs have served as a unique opportunity for high school students and families to connect with multiple local and national postsecondary institutions in a personal way. Some might question the value of one-on-one interactions with a college representative given today's access to internet, social media platforms, and the need to social distance in the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, interactions between high school students and colleges and universities—whether at their “dream” school and/or for a student to have their first exposure to college banners, brochures, and trinkets—can still offer important opportunities for cultivating a college-going culture. Seeing and learning about campus culture¹ through visits and even a one-on-one conversation with a professional college recruiter or a graduate, who can provide personal perspectives on what college can be, can be impactful to a student's college going experiences.

As COVID-19 cases grow exponentially and school districts wrestle with choosing between face-to-face instruction, hybrid, or online-only learning environments, where does this leave college advising and college fairs? Typically, college fairs and recruitment programs range from stand-alone evening or day-long events, fly-in college recruitment weekends, where students visit colleges with travel expenses paid, to weekend activities that partner with public and private groups to welcome families and community members to learn about higher education opportunities. Traditionally, school counselors, college centers, college enrollment personnel, high school front-office staff, and many others take the lead to plan and coordinate college fairs. These efforts are sometimes coordinated with NACAC² staff or organically within schools or districts. Multiple research studies have and continue to document that school counselors ***do not have*** the time or capacity to manage and adequately support college knowledge

¹ Barnard, B. (2018). College admission fairs: Do they matter? Forbes, see link: <https://tinyurl.com/y9x4hjey>

² National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is one of the largest organizations focused on college counseling and admissions support for students to transition into higher education.





development for students in low-income and under-resourced schools.³ School counselors are often overstretched and burdened to manage scheduling, testing, discipline, and administrative duties.

Therefore, this policy and practice paper provides practical suggestions to advance equitable outcomes for students, families, and schools to bridge and foster the development of college-going knowledge and learning opportunities. I also provide an equity guide checklist for high school and college personnel to evaluate and improve efforts to host college fairs and other programs intended to offer students and families chances to learn and connect with college campuses and college-going information. The equity guide checklist is intended for college recruiters and K-12 school administrators to consider new efforts to create a strong and developmental college fair opportunity for high school students in socially distanced or in-person programming.

The Challenge: How to Ensure College Fairs Are Equitable to Low-income High School Students

The complexities and nuances of the college application “gauntlet” can and has discouraged 10,000+ of students each year from applying to higher education.⁴ Local college fairs can provide needed information about financial aid, academic programs, and institutional resources and supports, particularly for students of color, low-income and first-generation college aspirants. College fairs can serve as one approach to improving students’ college pathways and institutional understanding by providing needed information to navigate college access structures. It is well documented that colleges and universities, which often target their recruitment to wealthy and white students, do not reach all eligible, prospective college

³ McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. SUNY Press.; Engberg, M. E., & Gilbert, A. J. (2014). The counseling opportunity structure: Examining correlates of four-year college-going rates. *Research in Higher Education*; Huerta, et al. (2020). College is . . . : focusing on the college knowledge of gang-associated Latino young men. *Urban Education*. DOI: 10.1177/0042085920934854

⁴ See Holzman, B., Klasik, D. & Baker, R. (2019). Gaps in the college application gauntlet. *Research in Higher Education*.





students due to limited resources and geographical limitations.⁵ However, strategically coordinated college fairs can serve as an opportunity to bridge the “knowledge gap” for students, families, and guardians to gain valuable information to support their navigational capital⁶ and expand their postsecondary institutions options and possibilities.

College fairs can provide structured and holistic workshops that are tailored to clarify the complex higher education application process, especially for those who are low-income and first-time college applicants. A primary benefit of college fairs is the consolidation of dozens or hundreds of postsecondary institutions, non-profits, and related advising services into one physical campus, location, or program so that students and other invested guardians and family members can learn about college opportunities and pathways. At the same time, students and their familial connections can experience a level of “sensory overload” at traditional college fairs, when they are among a crowd of hundreds of other high school students and college representatives collectively eager to impart new information. The pandemic era challenges the college access field, including high schools, colleges, and professional associations (e.g., NACAC and NARAC) to reconsider and rethink how they design and facilitate socially distanced and post-pandemic programs for prospective students to learn about college and application processes.

STEPS K-12 SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS CAN TAKE

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the planning and execution of college fairs and alternative programs to facilitate the development of college-going knowledge and navigational capital among will have to move online. We know that internet access is not widely available to all students, and school

⁵ See Jaquette, O., & Han, C. (2020). *Follow the Money: Recruiting and the Enrollment Priorities of Public Research Universities*.

⁶ Yosso defined navigational capital as marginalized students’ and families’ skills and resources to navigate social and structural institutions, which can be hostile environments for them. See Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8 (1), 69-91.





districts are scrambling to provide internet access. Simply put, reliable internet access has and continues to be an additional hurdle for students to complete high school homework and apply to college⁷, and must be ameliorated through public solutions.

As digital divides are structurally resolved, social distancing requirements require the creation and development of digital workshops must be implemented to increase college knowledge for students. The collection of 1-3-minute video workshops could be distributed through district-based and/or community-based youth organization text messages to nudge students about different aspects of the college application process.⁸ Such efforts could be amplified through partnerships with local and national organizations such as GetSchooled, GEAR Up, or Upward Bound. Similar to other regional and national efforts (e.g., Nudge4) to encourage high school and college students to complete their financial aid and other application materials, such efforts could offer an alternative approach to strengthen students' navigational capital. The development of workshops, to be hosted by local high school personnel or community organizations, recent high school alumni including college students, local college access professionals, or college representatives, are necessary to scaffold college knowledge development among high school students and families. The following six recommendations can guide high schools and school districts in their efforts to empower students and families in navigating college-going structures.

Don't go it alone: Build on existing fairs or partner to produce a compelling program

- Consider what college fairs are available in the area: School counselors and personnel should work to build coalitions with other counselors and high schools who are already hosting a college fair or other programs.
- Colleges and universities strongly prefer to attend fairs with sufficient

⁷ Venegas, K. (2007). The internet and college access: Challenges for low-income students. *American Academic*.

⁸ Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2015). Summer nudging: Can personalized text messages and peer mentor outreach increase college going among low-income high school graduates? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.





numbers of high school students in order to make the most efficient use of their time and travel budgets (when travel for in-person visits is possible again). By partnering with other high schools, your college fair can grow to a sufficient size to warrant a college registration fee. The fee can be used to offset expenses of hosting the program (e.g., creation of virtual curriculum for college knowledge development, electronic gift card incentives for student participation, technology/internet support for low-income students, Zoom subscriptions; and food costs, materials, childcare, raffles, etc. when in-person programs are possible).

- Consider working with your state or region's college admission counseling association (either a NACAC or ACRAO⁹ affiliate or local regional admission representative organization, see [NARAC's](#)¹⁰ website): Most have a college fair committee that can help you either host your own fair or join together.

Student preparation

The college fair can only be effective with sufficient planning and preparation for the student.

- Provide technology to make student's use of their time is effective. For example, QR or barcode scanning can facilitate the exchange of information efficiently. In socially distanced times, work to ensure that all students have reliable internet access, technological equipment, and a safe place from which to participate.
- Counsel students on effective questions to ask during the program (e.g., not just what majors are offered). Encourage questions that go beyond what they could find on the school's website. This can include access to key application deadlines for competitive or need-based scholarships, on-campus visit opportunities and programs (summer bridge programs, first-year transitions, etc.), and other offerings specific to the pandemic

⁹ American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (ACRAO) is an international group that focuses on student services, enrollment management, and other college and university functions.

¹⁰ National Association of Regional Admission Counselors (NARAC) is a national group that coordinates regional college access events throughout the United States.





era in which in-person visits are not possible.

- Help students create a “professional email” address for correspondence with colleges and for usage on college applications.
- One month prior to the college fair, encourage students to complete a free “career test” (e.g., Careerexplorer.com; <http://www.humanmetrics.com/personality>; <https://www.16personalities.com>) either in the high school career and college counseling center or trusted online resource to help students understand possible occupational and academic interests. These online resources can be thought-provoking tools to help students explore possible academic and career interests. They should not be used to determine or limit life or career possibilities. Many times, students may be unaware of the career and other opportunities possible in studying sociology, ethnic studies, mathematics, or engineering. Help students learn about the range of intellectual pursuits, and how those credentials provide access to not only professional careers in those fields, but also open doors to new intellectual and career possibilities and pathways to graduate school and other career preparation and opportunities.
- Provide a list of colleges in attendance, geographic locations, and other information that can help a student navigate thousands of college opportunities. The general public rarely recognizes that there are well over 4,000 not-for-profit colleges and universities offering diverse educational programs and possibilities.

Guidance for financial aid and literacy programs

Sessions on financial assistance should be facilitated by a financial aid representative from local non-profit colleges or universities, who can share accurate information about institution-specific, local, state, and federal aid programs (e.g., promise programs; state financial aid; financial aid for undocumented and international students; private versus public loans; and institutional aid and scholarships) and eligibility requirements. Whether students are enrolled in a well-resourced or under-funded school, it is essential to note that not all parents or guardians are familiar with the complicated financial aid process. For example, in a statewide survey





administered by the PACE/USC Rossier Annual Voter Poll (2020), **89% of registered California voters shared they are concerned about college affordability.**¹¹ Therefore, it is important for high schools to ensure that workshops are available to answer “basic” and complicated questions about financial aid. Program coordinators should ensure that individuals or consultants should not be able to “sell” their products or services to students and families such as FAFSA application submission support, college essay and application guidance, etc. during these informational programs.

Partner with local or regional college access non-profit groups

- As a part of community engagement, high schools, and professional organizations like NACAC and NARAC should work to partner with local or regional non-profit college access groups. Often, college access groups (e.g., Cash for College, College Advising Corp, Fulfillment Fund, GEAR Up, etc.) are eager to mentor students, support families and guardians, and communities with college-going information, and highlight community-based programming to improve college-going rates. This outreach can directly benefit colleges and universities, as efforts to increase college transition and prevent summer melt¹² is critical to local engagement to support students who need help with admissions, housing, financial aid forms, course selection, etc.
- College access groups can provide and facilitate connections to local colleges and universities and support college fair planning and development.
- Community-based youth organizations can also be ideal partners for helping high school students learn about college opportunities. Some youth find community-based youth organizations and spaces to be more trustworthy than their schools.¹³ Developing partnerships with such organizations in designing and delivering more impactful programming.

¹¹ PACE/USC Rossier Annual Voter Poll, see link: <https://tinyurl.com/y89trfbt>

¹² Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2014). A trickle or a torrent? Understanding the extent of summer “melt” among college-intending high school graduates. *Social Science Quarterly*.

¹³ Baldridge, B. J. (2019). *Reclaiming community: Race and the uncertain future of youth work*. Stanford University Press.





Free or low-cost on-site childcare spaces for children under the age of six (Post-COVID19)

Student-parents and parents or guardians of students need to be able to focus on the content of college information fairs. However, they might not be able to be fully present if childcare is not available. These childcare resources may be coordinated with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), high school-based preschools, or local trusted childcare centers, who are insured, bonded, and passed school district background checks.¹⁴ It is important to provide some support so that they can focus on the workshop or tabling with college representatives by providing a safe and open childcare space or activities to occupy young children, such as the following:

- Access to family-friendly restroom
- A dedicated family snack area, with free or low-cost healthy snacks
- Access to puzzles, age-appropriate toys, etc.
- Crayons and coloring pages

STEPS POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS AND OUTREACH PERSONNEL CAN TAKE

Reconsider approaches to college fairs and recruitment

- Colleges should accept invitations to college fairs that are “outside” traditional recruitment territories or that do not normally generate many applications. Is your institution visiting the same places year after year? By not visiting communities and schools outside of the beaten path, are you reproducing patterns of inequality that researchers¹⁵ have identified?
- Local colleges and universities should host college fairs on their college campuses. Consider either removing or reducing parking costs and associated fees, and host additional programs on weekends to improve high school student, guardian, and family attendance.
- Colleges should send academic advisors as recruiters to college fairs, so that students, families and guardians, build a connection and know who will support academic exploration once students are enrolled at the institution.

¹⁴ School district leadership should work with local childcare agencies to provide access to free or low-cost background checks for childcare providers.

¹⁵ See <https://emrresearch.org/>





Hire Multilingual and Culturally Competent Recruiters

Colleges and universities should hire multilingual and culturally competent college recruiters. Multiple higher education scholars have determined that selective colleges and universities employ recent alumnus to serve as college recruiters who had very positive campus experiences and are often white from high-income backgrounds.¹⁶ As colleges profess to be invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is important to hire and retain college recruiters who reflect the broadening racial and ethnic diversity of the US by considering staff members who are Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian American, and Pacific Islanders. These racially and ethnically diverse individuals may hold a heightened cultural competency and familial understanding of diverse students and families, and connect in a personal manner that can reassure first-generation college students and their families. Although they might not have had the most positive experiences on campus as students, they can offer a more nuanced perspective on what it's like to attend college at the particular institution and the resources and community supports available.

CRITICAL COMPONENTS FOR WORKSHOPS TARGETING LOW-INCOME AND FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS OF COLOR

The following table offers suggestions for workshops are to provide an opportunity for local school personnel, community-based college access groups, college and universities to offer sessions to support students, families, and guardians on the college access process. Determining the “right person” to deliver the session topics will be influenced by professional networks and resources, and content expertise. Sessions can be facilitated or rotated by college representatives, if staffing permits, to talk about each of the topics.

¹⁶ Bowman, N. A., & Bastedo, M. N. (2018). What role may admissions office diversity and practices play in equitable decisions?. *Research in Higher Education*; Stevens, M. L. (2009). *Creating a class: College admissions and the education of elites*. Harvard University Press.



College Fair Equity Check List

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General Topics	Guiding Questions	Workshop Provided in College Fair Sessions? (Yes or No)	Workshop Provided During the Academic Year? (Yes or No)
Post-secondary institutional types and characteristics	What is the difference between a two-year, four-year, and public versus private? Minority Serving Institution? What is the demographic information of the college/university?		
Financial Literacy	Financial aid workshop		
High School Curriculum and College Readiness	How relevant are high school courses and GPAs for admission into various college types?		
Community Leaders Panel	What consideration did local community leaders explore when applying to colleges and universities? How did their college majors or academic programs influence employment search and opportunities?		
Extracurricular activities and the connection to personal statements	Help students, families and guardians see the assets that non-standard extracurricular activities including part-time employment, sibling childcare responsibilities, community-based activism, and engagement to be incorporated into personal statements.		
Applying to college from a minoritized student population	Help students from various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientation status consider the campus qualities and support systems available in higher education to promote persistence and degree completion.		

College Fair Equity Check List

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Internships: What is it and when do I do it?	Help students learn about the value and application of an internships and how that can connect to academic majors or career fields in the future.		
College Majors and Career Pathways	Majors, career technical education, and minors – what does mean and how can parents or guardians support their children in the decision-making?		
Language Accessibility	Are workshops and college information sessions available in more than English? Schools should check the racial and ethnic demographics, and localized census data to understand language needs of families and/or guardians to ensure accessibility. Example, if 30% of school district enrollment is Vietnamese, are mailers and workshop announcements also available in that language?		
Online Webinar	Are sign-language or closed captioning options available to viewers? It is important to provide access to the recorded session, posted on YouTube or other digital platforms for future access and references by students, parents, or other guardians.		



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