

# Turning the Tide

## Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions

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A PROJECT OF THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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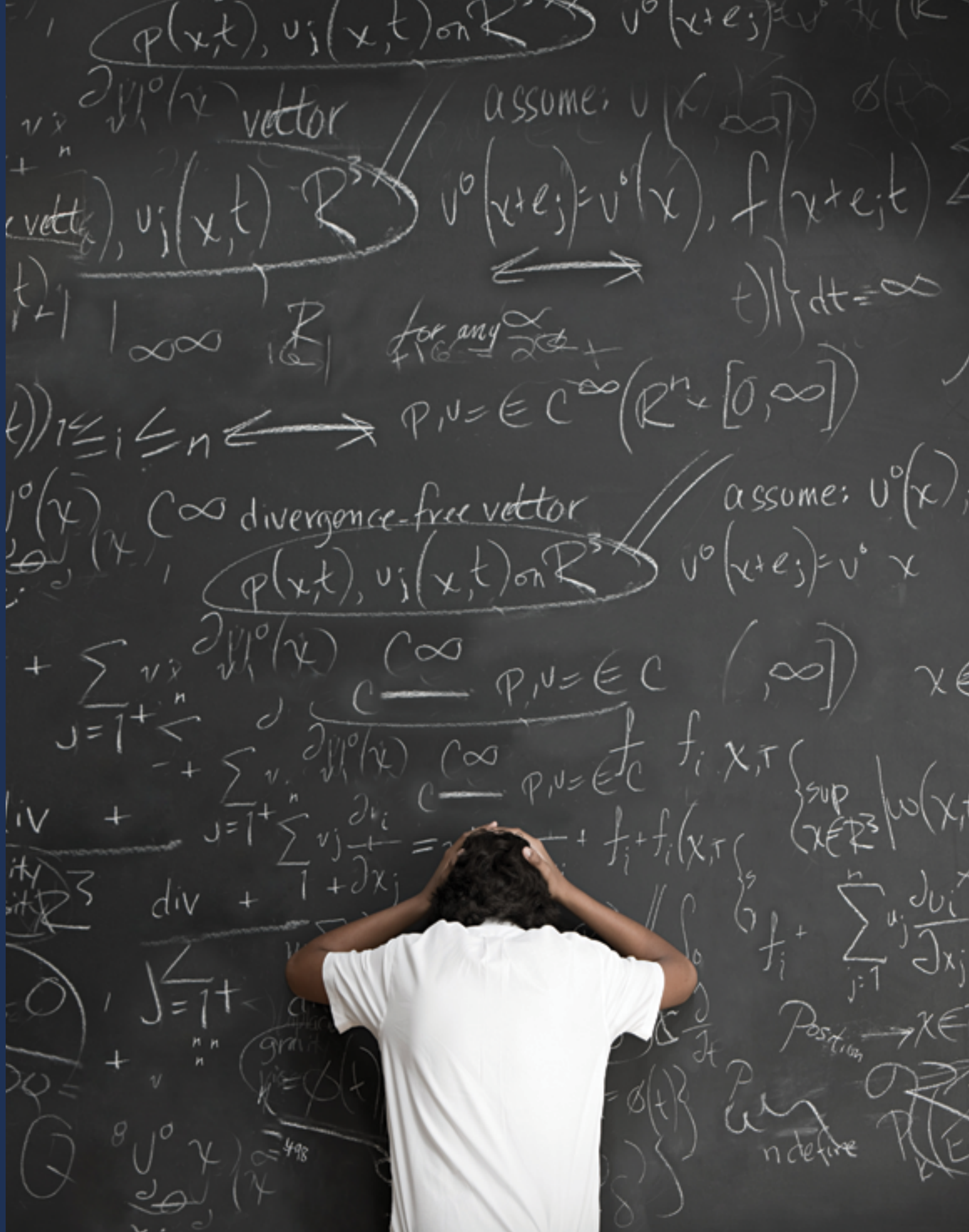
In addition, *Turning the Tide* is supported by the Board of Directors of the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, and by the Great Lakes Colleges Association. Endorsing this report signifies general agreement with the report and its recommendations, not necessarily agreement with every specific point and recommendation. Visit [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org) for additional endorsers.



This report stems from an exploratory meeting hosted by the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Participants included college admissions officers, university administrators, school guidance counselors and principals, character education experts, individuals representing national organizations of school guidance counselors, admission professionals, and independent schools as well as other key stakeholders. The purpose of the meeting was to consider how to improve the role of the college admissions process in promoting and assessing ethical and intellectual engagement. The recommendations here emerged from that meeting and have been revised in subsequent conversations with admissions deans. A list of those who have endorsed this report is included at the end of this document and online at [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org). Several of these endorsers have already made changes in their admissions materials or practices as the result of this report. Making Caring Common, in collaboration with the Education Conservancy, will work with college admissions officers and other key stakeholders—including parents, high school guidance counselors, and high school and college administrators—over the next two years to far more widely implement the report recommendations.



*Turning the Tide was written by Richard Weissbourd, Senior Lecturer and Co-director of the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in collaboration with Lloyd Thacker, Executive Director of the Education Conservancy, and the Making Caring Common team including Trisha Ross Anderson, Alison Cashin, Luba Falk Feigenberg, and Jennifer Kahn.*



# Executive Summary

**T**oo often, today’s culture sends young people messages that emphasize personal success rather than concern for others and the common good (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Putnam, 2005; Putnam, 2014; Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). And too often the college admissions process—a process that involves admissions offices, guidance counselors, parents and many other stakeholders—contributes to this problem. As a rite of passage for many students and a major focus for many parents, the college admissions process is powerfully positioned to send different messages that help young people become more generous and humane in ways that benefit not only society but students themselves. Yet high school students often perceive colleges as simply valuing their achievements, not their responsibility for others and their communities. While some colleges have diligently sought to convey to applicants the importance of concern for others and the common good, many other colleges have not. The messages that colleges do send about concern for others are commonly drowned out by the power and frequency of messages from parents and the larger culture emphasizing individual achievement. Further, even when students and parents receive the message that contributions and service to others do count, they often seek to “game” service.

This report advances a new, widely shared vision of college admissions that seeks to respond to this deeply concerning problem. It makes the case that college admissions can send compelling messages that both ethical engagement—especially concern for others and the common good—and intellectual engagement are highly important. Colleges can powerfully collaborate to send different messages to high school students about what colleges value. This report, endorsed by over 80 key stakeholders in college admissions, represents such a collaboration.

More specifically, this report takes up three challenges. First, it describes how college admissions can motivate high school students to contribute to others and their communities in more authentic and meaningful ways that promote in them genuine investment in the collective good and deeper understanding of and respect for others, especially those different from them in background and character. Second, it demonstrates how the admissions process can more accurately and meaningfully assess young people’s contributions to others and their communities, especially students who vary widely by race, culture and class.

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Promoting ethical and intellectual development via college admissions requires taking up two other related goals. In some communities students suffer from a lack of academic resources and opportunities. In other communities pervasive pressure to perform academically at high levels and to enter selective colleges takes an emotional toll on students and often squeezes out the time and energy students have to consider and contribute to others. A healthy and fair admissions process cannot simply encourage students to devote more time to others: It needs simultaneously to reward those who demonstrate true citizenship, deflate undue academic performance pressure and redefine achievement in ways that create greater equity and access for economically diverse students.

The following report offers specific recommendations for reshaping the admissions process in each of the following three areas:

**1** Promoting more meaningful contributions to others, community service and engagement with the public good.

**2** Assessing students' ethical engagement and contributions to others in ways that reflect varying types of family and community contributions across race, culture and class.

**3** Redefining achievement in ways that both level the playing field for economically diverse students and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

*For a fuller discussion of each of these recommendations, including suggestions for specific changes in application essay questions and recommendations, please see the full report. Additional resources are available at [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org).*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE

The admissions process should both clearly signal that concern for others and the common good are highly valued in admissions and describe what kinds of service, contributions and engagement are most likely to lead to responsible work, caring relationships and ethical citizenship.



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## Recommendation #1: Meaningful, Sustained Community Service

We recommend that students engage in forms of service that are authentically chosen—that emerge from a student’s particular passions and interests—that are consistent and well-structured, and that provide opportunity for reflection both individually and with peers and adults. **We also recommend that students undertake at least a year of sustained service or community engagement (see below for description of “community engagement”). This service can take the form of substantial and sustained contributions to one’s family, such as working outside the home to provide needed income.** Just as important, it’s vital that the admissions process squarely challenges misconceptions about what types of service are valued in admissions. Some students seek to “game” service by taking up high-profile or exotic forms of community service, sometimes in faraway places, that have little meaning to them but appear to demonstrate their entrepreneurial spirit and leadership. **The admissions process should clearly convey that what counts is not whether service occurred locally or in some distant place or whether students were leaders, but whether students immersed themselves in an experience and the emotional and ethical awareness and skills generated by that experience.**

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## Recommendation #2: Collective Action that Takes on Community Challenges

While individual service can be valuable, we also encourage young people to consider various forms of community engagement, including working in groups on community problems, whether the problem is a local park that needs attention, bullying in their schools or

communities or some form of environmental degradation. These types of activities can help young people develop key emotional and ethical capacities, including problem-solving skills and group awareness, as well as greater understanding of and investment in the common good.

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## Recommendation #3: Authentic, Meaningful Experiences with Diversity

We encourage students to undertake community service and engagement that deepens their appreciation of diversity. Too often, current forms of service are patronizing to recipients and don’t spark in those providing service a deeper understanding of social structures and inequalities. Rather than students “doing for” students from different backgrounds, for example, we encourage students to “do with”—to work in diverse groups for sustained periods of time on school and community challenges, groups in which students learn from one another. Importantly, these experiences of diversity should be carefully constructed and facilitated.

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## Recommendation #4: Service that Develops Gratitude and a Sense of Responsibility for the Future

We encourage students to take up forms of community engagement, service and reflection that help them appreciate the contributions of the generations before them—how their lives are built on the service of others—and their responsibility to their descendants. Working within a tradition, whether religious or secular, such as 4H clubs, can help generate this kind of gratitude and responsibility.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSING ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHERS ACROSS RACE, CULTURE AND CLASS

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### **Recommendation #1: Contributions to One's Family**

The admissions process should clearly send the message to students, parents and other caregivers that not only community engagement and service, but also students' family contributions, such as caring for younger siblings, taking on major household duties or working outside the home to provide needed income, are highly valued in the admissions process. Far too often there is a perception that high-profile, brief forms of service tend to count in admissions, while these far more consistent, demanding, and deeper family contributions are overlooked. Students should have clear opportunities to report these family contributions on their applications.

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### **Recommendation #2: Assessing Students' Daily Awareness of and Contributions to Others**

The admissions process should seek to assess more effectively whether students are ethically responsible and concerned for others and their communities in their daily lives. The nature of students' day-to-day conduct should be weighed more heavily in admissions than the nature of students' stints of service.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING UNDUE ACHIEVEMENT PRESSURE, REDEFINING ACHIEVEMENT, AND LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR ECONOMICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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### Recommendation #1: Prioritizing Quality—Not Quantity—of Activities

Admissions offices should send a clear message that numerous extracurricular activities or long “brag sheets” do not increase students’ chances of admission.

**Applications should state plainly that students should feel no pressure to report more than two or three substantive extracurricular activities and should discourage students from reporting activities that have not been meaningful to them.** Applications should provide room to list perhaps no more than four activities or should simply ask students to describe two or three meaningful activities narratively. Applications should underscore the importance of the quality and not the quantity of students’ extracurricular activities. Admissions offices should define students’ potential for achievement in terms of the depth of students’ intellectual and ethical engagement and potential.

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### Recommendation #2: Awareness of Overloading on AP/IB Courses

Admissions offices should convey to students that simply taking large numbers of AP or IB courses per year is often not as valuable as sustained achievement in a limited number of areas. While some students can benefit from and handle large numbers of AP/IB courses, many students benefit from taking smaller numbers of advanced courses. Too often there is the perception that these students are penalized in the admissions process.

At the same time, it’s vital to increase access to advanced courses for large numbers of students in schools without access to adequately challenging courses.

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### Recommendation #3: Discouraging “Overcoaching”

Admissions offices should warn students and parents that applications that are “overcoached” can jeopardize desired admission outcomes. Admissions officers, guidance counselors and other stakeholders should remind parents and students that authenticity, confidence, and honesty are best reflected in the student’s original voice. Admission officers should consider inviting students (and families) to reflect on the ethical challenges they faced during the application process.

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### Recommendation #4: Options for Reducing Test Pressure

Admissions offices should work to relieve undue pressure associated with admission tests (SAT and ACT). Options for reducing this pressure include: making these tests optional, clearly describing to applicants how much these tests actually “count” and how they are considered in the admissions process, and discouraging students from taking an admissions test more than twice. Colleges should tell students that taking the test more than twice is very unlikely to meaningfully improve students’ scores. Colleges should also be asked to justify the use of admissions tests by providing data that indicates how scores are related to academic performance at their particular institution.

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## Recommendation #5: Expanding Students' Thinking about “Good” Colleges

Admissions officers and guidance counselors should challenge the misconception that there are only a handful of excellent colleges and that only a handful of colleges create networks that are vital to job success. It is incumbent upon parents to challenge this misconception as well. There is a broad range of excellent colleges across the country, and students who attend these colleges are commonly successful later in life in the full array of professions. There are many paths to professional success, and students and parents should be far more concerned with whether a college is a good fit for a student than how high status it is.

Finally, we are keenly aware that reforming college admissions is only one piece of a far larger challenge. Ultimately, we cannot bring about a sea change in the messages our culture sends to young people unless educational institutions at every level elevate and embody a healthier set of values. While this change needs to start or accelerate from multiple points, we view our recommendations as one powerful place to begin. In the face of deeply troubling trends that only seem to be worsening, it is time to say “Enough.”

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# Endorsers

Martha Blevins Allman, Dean of Admissions,  
**WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY**

Diane Anci, Dean of Admission & Vice President for Enrollment,  
**KENYON COLLEGE**

Cindy Babington, Vice President for Admission & Financial Aid,  
**DEPAUW UNIVERSITY**

Phillip Ballinger, Associate Vice President for Enrollment and Undergraduate Admissions,  
**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**

Michael Beseda, Vice President for Enrollment and University Communications,  
**WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY**

Todd Bland, Headmaster,  
**MILTON ACADEMY**

Jim Bock, Vice President and Dean of Admissions,  
**SWARTHMORE COLLEGE**

Julie Browning, Dean for Undergraduate Enrollment,  
**RICE UNIVERSITY**

Flora Z. Chan, Associate Director of Student Life for Diversity and Community,  
**AMHERST COLLEGE**

Debra J. Chermonte, Vice President and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid,  
**OBERLIN COLLEGE**

Jonathan Cohen, President,  
**NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE CENTER**

KC Cohen, Middle and Upper School Counselor,  
**RIVERDALE COUNTRY SCHOOL**

Susan Dileno, Vice President for Enrollment Management,  
**OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY**

Zina Evans, Vice President for Enrollment Management, Associate Vice Provost,  
**UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA**

Stephen M. Farmer, Vice Provost for Enrollment and Undergraduate Admissions  
**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL**

Matthew X. Fissinger, Director of Undergraduate Admission,  
**LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**

William R. Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid,  
**HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

Andrew Flagel, Senior Vice President for Students and Enrollment,  
**BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY**

Katie Fretwell, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid,  
**AMHERST COLLEGE**

Scott Friedhoff, Vice President for Enrollment and College Relations,  
**COLLEGE OF WOOSTER**

Eric J. Furda, Dean of Admissions,  
**UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

Howard Gardner, Professor,  
**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Barbara Gill, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management,  
**UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND**

Donald Heller, Dean, College of Education,  
**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

Michael S. Hills, Director of Admissions,  
**DENISON UNIVERSITY**

Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM, President,  
**DEPAUL UNIVERSITY**

**HORACE MANN SCHOOL**

Donald Hossler, Senior Scholar, Center For Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice,  
**ROSSIER SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, USC**

**INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HEALTH ASSOCIATION**

Kedra Ishop, PhD, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management,  
**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

Bill Jackson, Founder, President, CEO,  
**GREATSCHOOLS**

Stephanie Jones, Associate Professor,  
**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Steve Klein, Vice President, Enrollment Management,  
**ALBION COLLEGE**

Maria Laskaris, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid,  
**DARTMOUTH COLLEGE**

John F. Latting, Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Enrollment, Dean of Admission,  
**EMORY UNIVERSITY**

Cornell Lesane, Dean of Admissions,  
**ALLEGHENY COLLEGE**

Jason C. Locke, Associate Vice Provost for Enrollment,  
**CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

Jessica Marinaccio, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid,  
**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

John Mahoney, Director of Undergraduate Admissions,  
**BOSTON COLLEGE**

Robert Massa, Senior Vice President Enrollment & Institutional Planning,  
**DREW UNIVERSITY**

Kathleen McCartney, President,  
**SMITH COLLEGE**

Ann Bowe McDermott, Director of Admissions,  
**COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS**

Judith McLaughlin, Senior Lecturer,  
**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Scott Meiklejohn, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid,  
**BOWDOIN COLLEGE**

James Miller, Dean of Admission, **BROWN UNIVERSITY**

Courtney Minden, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions,  
**BABSON COLLEGE**

MacKenzie Moritz, Associate Director for Strategic  
Partnerships, **FRANKLIN PROJECT AT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE**

Eric Monheim, Director of College Counseling,  
**ST. MARK'S SCHOOL**

Jacob Murray, Faculty Director for Professional Education,  
**BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**  
**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS**

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Financial Aid, **UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

Angel B. Perez, Vice President for Enrollment and Student  
Success, **TRINITY COLLEGE**

Denise Pope, Senior Lecturer,  
**STANFORD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND**  
**CO-FOUNDER, CHALLENGE SUCCESS**

Jeremiah Quinlan, Dean of Undergraduate Admission,  
**YALE UNIVERSITY**

Janet Lavin Rapelye, Dean of Admission,  
**PRINCETON UNIVERSITY**

Gregory Warren Roberts, Dean of Admission,  
**UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA**

Walter Anthony Robinson, Associate Vice Chancellor,  
**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA DAVIS**

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James Ryan, Dean, **HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL**  
**OF EDUCATION**

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**PREVENTION SCIENCE AND PRACTICE AND CAS IN**  
**COUNSELING PROGRAMS, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL**  
**OF EDUCATION**

Stuart Schmill, Dean of Admissions,  
**MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Falone Serna, Director of Admission, **REED COLLEGE**

Mike Sexton, Vice President for Enrollment Management,  
**SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY**

Audrey Smith, Vice President for Enrollment,  
**SMITH COLLEGE**

Rod Skinner, Director of College Counseling,  
**MILTON ACADEMY**

Joseph A Soares, Chair, Department of Sociology,  
Professor of Sociology, **WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY**

Eric Staab, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid,  
**KALAMAZOO COLLEGE**

Andrew K. Strickler, Dean of Admission & Financial Aid,  
**CONNECTICUT COLLEGE**

Jonathan M. Stroud, Vice President for Enrollment &  
Communications, **EARLHAM COLLEGE**

Lloyd Thacker, Executive Director,  
**EDUCATION CONSERVANCY**

J. Carey Thompson, Vice President of Enrollment and  
Communications, **RHODES COLLEGE**

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**WABASH COLLEGE**

Kristin R. Tichenor, Senior Vice President,  
**WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE**

William Vanderbilt, Vice President for Admissions,  
**HOPE COLLEGE**

Kelly Walter, Associate Vice President and Executive  
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Mitch Warren, Director, Office of Admissions,  
**PURDUE UNIVERSITY**

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Officer, CASEL; Professor,  
**UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO**

Harold Wingood, Interim Dean of Admission and Financial  
Aid, **ANTIOCH COLLEGE**

Richard Weissbourd, Senior Lecturer,  
**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

James Youniss, Wylma R. & James R. Curtin Professor  
Emeritus, **THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA**

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HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
14 Appian Way  
Cambridge, MA 02138

617.384.9544  
mcc@gse.harvard.edu

