

RESPONDING TO STUDENT VOICES

3 SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

By Steve Hahn and Laura Zimmermann

The process of [applying for financial aid](#) and college admission is arduous, even for well-resourced students and their families. For first-generation college applicants, those enduring financial hardships or those without the support of their parents and families, the journey to college can be downright overwhelming. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the American economy and shined a light on widespread financial insecurity, thus making the transformation of the financial aid process even more critical today.

For Enoch Jemmott and Karoline Jimenez, two Brooklyn-based students profiled in the documentary [Personal Statement](#), their experiences with the college application process opened their eyes to the inefficiencies, inequities and inadequacies inherent in the American higher education system. Now they are calling for change to clear the path for those students who will follow in their footsteps.

We recently spoke with Jemmott and Jimenez about their experiences and how higher education leaders can create a different, more encouraging experience for future generations of students.

Leveling the Playing Field: A Student-Centric Approach to Higher Education's Affordability Crisis



Higher education is at a significant inflection point where traditional thinking, established processes and existing services may fail to serve the students and institutions of the future. Those institutions that prepare now will be better positioned to serve new generations of students in the years to come. [Read more.](#)

Outdated Processes Fail to Support All Students

Jemmott and Jimenez worked as peer counselors helping others apply to college. Yet even with their knowledge of financial aid and college admissions and the support of a network of teachers and counselors, they found the process difficult and frustrating.

“I was trained for months in all things pertaining to the FAFSA, and I felt like I was well informed. But when I started filling it out, it was a whole different thing. There were words I didn’t understand, and my parents didn’t know any of those things either because I’m a first-generation student.”

— Enoch Jemmott

[Both students struggled](#) with understanding the language used in the Federal Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) form required for all aid-seeking college-bound students. And both had trouble acquiring their parents’ tax forms for a variety of reasons.

[Jimenez also worked with many first-generation, immigrant or undocumented students](#) who were unsure how the process would work for them or even if college was an option at all. A first-generation student of immigrant parents herself, Jimenez says she was also uncertain whether she would be able to clear the hurdles to college admission.

“A lot of kids get into their dream school and then look at their financial aid package. And they have to be the ones to bury their own dreams because they can’t afford them.”

— Karoline Jimenez

Making the Process Work for a Broader Range of Students

Stories like those of Jemmott and Jimenez are becoming increasingly common as the demographics of college students expand to include more first-generation, immigrant, and other underrepresented and vulnerable populations. And there are many other well-qualified individuals with stories much like theirs but whose paths do not lead to enrollment in a postsecondary institution.

Students today come from vastly differing family and educational backgrounds, possess varied life and work experiences, and aspire to individual academic goals. Accordingly, the financial aid process cannot be one that is narrowly scoped or inflexible to unique circumstances.

There are three primary solutions colleges and universities can consider to address the challenges inherent in the current processes, which will eliminate some of the barriers faced by Jemmott and Jimenez when they applied to college.



Focus on
Early Outreach
and Education



Streamline
the Student
Experience



Invest in
Student-Centric
Technology

Focus on Early Outreach and Education

Jemmott and Jimenez went to high school and worked as peer counselors in an environment where the college counselor-to-student ratio was astronomical, a scenario that is, unfortunately, all too common in American high schools. Higher education leaders can improve that ratio by making financial aid roles at colleges more community-facing.

Offering guidance to students as early as possible starts well before they are thinking about going to college. Financial aid professionals can coordinate with middle schools and high schools to provide early financial literacy education to students and their families that will set them up for later success.

It is critical for colleges and universities to find ways to remove fear and trepidation from the financial aid and college application processes. Start by ensuring that the language used in all available resources is accessible and easy to understand for as many students and families as possible. There should be resources written in multiple languages, and whenever possible, institutions should hire bilingual or trilingual counselors who can educate immigrant and international students and their families about the nuances of the process.

“As an immigrant and a person of color, living in America is already hard. Getting into college is ten times harder. A lot of students face housing insecurity or family issues that make the current process difficult. There should be a lot more options for all these different circumstances when a student applies to college.”

— Karoline Jimenez

“We understand that there has to be a standard procedure to an important process like this. But it just doesn’t work for everyone.”

— Enoch Jemmott

Another key element of this outreach revolves around teaching students and families what resources are available to them and how to get the answers they need at each point in the journey — regardless of which school they choose to attend. Colleges and universities should seek to embody the notion that the financial aid office is there to assist students as an ally in the process. Long before college admission is considered through the academic lens, it is viewed through a financial one, as families narrow their options based on the information they have.

Streamline the Student Experience

In many cases, higher education considers financial aid a business operation. Yet increasingly, financial aid offices are evolving into a vital student access hub, integrated with admissions and other student services.

Students do not care about a university’s divisions or how services are administered. They do, however, care deeply if it is difficult to get the business side of their education in order. Creating an institutional strategy that consolidates the student experience into one comprehensive resource eliminates the need for students to navigate multiple offices and processes. The days when the recruitment team would do its work and then throw that application over the wall to financial aid are over. Treating students as whole individuals and addressing all aspects of their educational journey, while not an easy task, sets institutions on the path to creating a student-centric environment.



Invest in Technology

[Technology can also play a vital role](#) in creating a student-centric approach to financial aid by delivering a common interface that offers streamlined, modern insights and support.

By investing in intelligent automation for certain back-office functions (e.g., aid packaging, verification, document collection, etc.), financial aid staff can redirect their efforts to spend more time with students, helping to demystify the process. Chatbots can also be used to answer frequently asked questions to allow the front office to be creative and individualized in addressing more specific queries. Even apps like WhatsApp, FaceTime and Snapchat can be useful to engage with a younger generation of incoming students in a more personalized way.

The bottom line is that the college application process as it stands today does not serve all students, and there are some steps colleges and universities can take to bridge that gap. By investing time and resources in outreach, integration and technology, we can clear the path for future generations of students like Jemmott and Jimenez and position institutions to remain viable in a rapidly changing environment.



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Where Are They Now?

In July 2020, **Enoch Jemmott** graduated from Queens College with a degree in media production. He hopes to utilize his degree by working as a director's assistant or production assistant to gain experience in the field.

Karoline Jimenez just finished her junior year at the State University of New York at New Paltz, majoring in theater and English, after taking a short break to attend a 15-week intensive program for acting at the Stella Adler Academy of Acting & Theatre in Los Angeles last year.

Both Jemmott and Jimenez are still active in seeking to change the college application process and increase access to higher education for future generations. Currently, they are collaborating on the [#WeBelongInCollege campaign](#) to "help other students get to and through college" by sharing stories of struggle and triumph.

Key Takeaways

Higher education leaders who want to make the application process easier for all students should:

Think differently.

Focus the financial aid department's mission primarily on outreach and on being a campus hub for access for all students. Recruitment activities should complement this mission.

Plan differently.

Seek to find ways to streamline the process by integrating admissions, enrollment, recruitment and financial aid to provide a comprehensive resource for students.

Act differently.

Invest in technology that supports a student-centric approach to financial aid and admissions.