

The Journey from Higher Ed Roles to Careers in K-12 Independent Schools

By Jennifer Christensen and Chris Boyle

At Carney Sandoe, we often see higher education admission and enrollment professionals successfully transition into K-12 independent schools, bringing with them valuable experience from college communities and a skill set that translates seamlessly into this new environment. From admission and college counseling to administration, advancement, and beyond, there are a wide variety of roles in independent schools that benefit from a higher ed background. To help those considering such a move to imagine the possibilities, our team invited current independent school professionals who made the leap themselves to respond to two questions. Through their responses, we explore the diverse experiences, career paths, and opportunities that await those curious about the K-12 independent school world.



Carney
Sandoe
& ASSOCIATES

1. Which skills and experiences from your time in college admissions have been most helpful in your work today?
2. What inspired you to make the leap from college admissions to the world of independent schools?

Head of School



Ryan Dahlem

Head of School
The Rivers School (MA)

I was a high school teacher before working in college admission and was initially drawn to learning more about the admission process and the experience of students navigating the transition to college. Working in college admission provided an important perspective on what students and families should be prioritizing, and not prioritizing, as they look ahead to college. As a school leader, this perspective has been invaluable in shaping how I think about preparing students to thrive in college.

I made the transition because I was first introduced to independent schools through my work in college admission and was eager to learn more about these transformational, mission-driven communities. In many ways, independent schools function like small universities but allow you to see the impact on students up close while sharing in a community of talented colleagues and supportive families. It has been such a rewarding transition.

Previous K-12 experience: Assistant Head of School, Upper School Assistant Principal, and Director of Admission and Financial Aid at St. Margaret's Episcopal School (CA), Math Teacher and Coach at University High School (CA). *College admission experience:* Stanford University.



Celeste Herrera

Head of School
The Calhoun School (NY)

In college admission, I learned to identify and appreciate the "wow factor" in people and institutions. It's the same skill that helps me attract and retain new faculty, inspire my administrative team, and celebrate the curiosity and creativity of our students. And having read thousands of college essays, I learned the importance of authentic storytelling--it's a muscle I now use every day to tell Calhoun's remarkable story to the world.

After a few years of acting as a change agent in the lives of students I never met, I realized I needed a greater sense of community and connection. I wanted to feel the direct impact of my work on a day-to-day basis and be surrounded by people who were united by a common purpose. Plus, I dreamed of running a school filled with pets; now, a dream fulfilled!

Previous K-12 experience: Assistant Head of School, High School Director, and Director of College Counseling at The Dalton School (NY) and Director of College Guidance at de Toledo High School (CA). *College admission experience:* University of Pennsylvania.



Laura Ross

Head of School
Harvard-Westlake School (CA)

I think one of the biggest skills was how to listen when people are stressed about something. The college process brings out so much in parents and children and their relationships and learning to help navigate tough issues and conversations directly translates into my work now. The experience of working in college counseling and admissions also helps me understand what often drives anxiety in students and parents that comes out in other areas of school life. It also gives me some legitimacy when people have questions about whether ideas or changes will have an impact on college outcomes.

I made the transition for two major reasons – I had just had my first child (who is now 20!) and knew it would be hard to travel that much with a baby. The larger reason that has stayed with me all these years is that I love being a part of a school community. On the admissions side you get to meet some great students during the admissions process and they either a) break your heart and go somewhere else or b) come to your college/university and you never see them because you are right back out on the road recruiting the next class. As I told someone trying to decide whether to make this change “the challenges are greater on the high school side but the joys are deeper.”

Previous K-12 experience: Associate Head and Upper School Head at Harvard-Westlake School (CA), Upper School Head at Greenhill School (TX), Director of College Counseling at St. Stephen's Episcopal School (TX) and Convent of the Sacred Heart High School (CA). *College admission experience:* Scripps College and Columbia University.

Associate/Assistant Head of School



Tamar Adegbile

Associate Head of School
and Head of Upper School
Crane Country Day School (CA)

As a Head of Middle School and Associate Head of School in a K-8 school, I'm somewhat removed from the day-to-day world of college admission and college counseling. However, my experience in both directly contributes to my current work. Among the areas we consistently work at is answering the questions "How do we communicate our values?" and "How do we respond to people who want us to be something different than what we are?" Additionally, we need to know the other schools in our area to authentically communicate what is unique about our school and move forward with its growth. A lot of this I learned how to do in my work in admissions and counseling.

With the increased selectivity at the school I was working at, I found it really hard to say "no" so often to the students I had grown attached to. I wanted more of the experience of connecting with and supporting students. I remember leaving a particularly tough committee session and going directly to a job fair, which led to my first college counseling job. I never looked back.

Previous K-12 experience: Director of Student Well Being at Avenues: The World School (CA), Director of College Counseling at Cate School (CA), Upper School Dean at Harvard-Westlake School (CA), and Senior Associate Director of College Counseling at Riverdale Country School (NY). College admission experience: Columbia University and Vassar College.

Student Affairs/Dean of Students



Jennifer Blake

Dean of Students
Waterford School (UT)

All of my work in schools (admissions, academic dean, college counseling, leadership roles) has involved balancing institutional and individual needs while being a good listener and question asker, skills honed while working in college admission. Another skill that has served me well since my college admission days is the ability to read a room or to ask what a family or group of students need rather than to assume I know what the audience wants. In addition, in any job, one needs to juggle many tasks while being professional and positive and that was certainly a skill I developed in admissions! And of course, in college admissions, paying attention to and interpreting data is a key skill that schools need more and more.

I loved getting to know and working with high school students in their college search process but as soon as they arrived on campus, I was off again, visiting high schools for six to eight weeks. I did not get to see or support students as they settled into their new college, and I felt as if I was missing something. I did love college admissions -- the traveling, the work with counselors, the ability to encourage students from underserved communities that they could be successful in a private college far from home, the clear evidence that I'd increased applications or yield -- but in the end, the ability to develop more long lasting relationships with students and families drew me to working in independent schools. And, once at an independent school, the ability to thrive in a number of different roles has kept me here.

Previous K-12 experience Associate Head of School at Rowland-Hall School (UT), Academic Dean, Director of the Annual Fund, and Co-Director of College Counseling at Marin Academy (CA), Director of Admissions at Crystal Springs Uplands School (CA). College admission experience: Mt. Holyoke College.

Division Director



Joy Prince

Director of Upper School
The Agnes Irwin School (PA)

A deep understanding of how students present themselves in the admissions process sharpened my ability to guide them in authentic self-reflection, goal-setting, and communication. I also honed skills in relationship-building, data-informed decision-making, and working with families—strengths that directly support my work in independent schools. Empathy is a key skill, and in my current role as a division director, I work to understand the person in front of me and what they need. Empathy is especially helpful when difficult situations/conversations arise with students, faculty/staff, and parents. Asking questions and leading with curiosity are also essential.

I wanted to work with students earlier in their journey—helping them grow not just at the finish line of the college process, but throughout their academic and personal development. Independent schools allow me to engage more deeply with students, families, and faculty in a mission-driven community.

Previous K-12 experience: Director of College Counseling at Atlanta Girls' School, Dean of College Advising at The Weber School (GA), and Director of College Counseling and Dean of Eleventh Grade at Holy Innocents' Episcopal School (GA). College admission experience: Agnes Scott College.



Kate McKenna

High School Principal
International School Bangkok

First, presentation and communication skills. In admissions, I regularly hosted events and fielded questions from students and parents about my university. That experience helped me become confident in engaging an audience, building connections, and thinking on my feet — skills I now use daily with students, families, and faculty. Second, adaptability and organization. As a new professional, I was responsible for planning my own travel and school visits, which demanded careful organization and flexibility. When plans inevitably shifted- and they often did!- I had to problem-solve quickly. That ability to stay composed and responsive has carried directly into school leadership, where each day brings unexpected challenges. In fact, I would say something happens everyday as a school leader that I didn't "plan" on happening-but I am needed to support or respond. Finally, my admissions work solidified my love of education. Visiting high schools and mentoring students on their next steps made me realize how much I enjoy supporting young people in reaching their goals — a passion that continues to drive my work today.

I transitioned because visiting schools made me realize that I wanted to work more closely with students. It is fun to be "in the muck" with them so to speak. I also enjoyed learning about teaching and learning and having the opportunity to teach classes alongside my counseling. Overall, I think switching sides of the desk can be very rewarding-- but you have to be willing to live by bells and do lunch duty. In other words, come to schools if you want to be immersed in that community. The days are long but the impact is lifelong... at least I hope so!

Previous experience: Assistant Head and High School Principal at International School Nido de Aguilas (Santiago, Chile); High School Vice Principal at Shanghai American School (Shanghai, China), Director of College Counseling & Senior Class Dean at American College of Sofia (Sofia, Bulgaria), Counselor & AP Coordinator at American School of Asuncion (Asuncion, Paraguay), Counselor and English Teacher at American Overseas School of Rome (Rome Italy), Asst. Director of College Counseling, Dorm Head & English Teacher at Episcopal HS (VA). College admission experience: The University of the South Sewanee .

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging



Frank Brown

Director of DEIB

The Westminster Schools (GA)

As a college admissions officer, I learned how to build trust quickly among counselors, students, and families, while also developing the ability to communicate clearly about complex issues with diverse stakeholders. Coordinating admitted-student days sharpened my project management skills. Together, these experiences directly shape how I lead and support my work in independent schools.

I moved to independent schools to build relationships that extend beyond a single admission cycle and to engage more deeply in students' growth. Teaching, coaching, and eventually moving into leadership opened doors for impact and career development that higher education could not provide.

Previous K-12 experience: [Director of Diversity, Inclusion & Outreach, teacher, and coach at Forsyth Country Day School \(NC\).](#)

College experience: [Wake Forest University.](#)



Nikki Chambers

Dean of Diversity, Equity,
Inclusion and Belonging
and History Teacher

*The Williston Northampton
School (MA)*

My tenure in enrollment management prepared me for independent school leadership in a myriad of ways. I developed a keen ability to evaluate student potential by analyzing quantitative data (grades, test scores, and academic curriculum) alongside the personal narratives (essays, letters of recommendation) that reveal a student's talents, intellectual passions, ambitions, and capacity for growth. I became skilled at navigating nuanced, often high-stakes conversations with students, families, and faculty, balancing empathy with clarity. Admissions demanded mastery of complex project management: overseeing multiple admission cycles, public speaking, coordinating travel, and executing high-visibility events under immovable deadlines. This work required both strategic vision and a deep understanding of how individual student stories connect to institutional priorities. These experiences now fuel my independent school leadership, where I work to design equitable systems, expand professional development for faculty, and cultivate a school culture where every community member feels seen, valued, and supported.

I moved into independent schools because I wanted to be part of a student's story from the inside—to witness their growth over time rather than meeting them only at the point of application. I was inspired by the chance to help shape a school culture where every student feels seen, valued, and empowered to pursue their fullest potential. Independent schools allow me to merge strategic leadership with my passion for teaching and learning, creating opportunities to lead and learn alongside students and colleagues. I am especially energized when helping students cultivate intellectual curiosity, encouraging them to ask big questions, explore new perspectives, and engage deeply with the world around them. This work feels not only holistic, but deeply purposeful because it's rooted in my belief that education, when done with care and intention, can transform lives and communities.

College admission experience: [Barnard College and Smith College](#)

Enrollment



Jamila Everett

Dean of
Enrollment Management
The Webb Schools (CA)

My work in college admissions at USC, Caltech, and Pitzer shaped how I lead enrollment at an independent school. At USC, I learned to manage competitive applicant pools. Caltech taught me how to evaluate exceptional academic talent and communicate complex priorities clearly to families and counselors. At Pitzer, I deepened my focus on mission-driven recruitment, diversity, and the power of personal storytelling. These combined experiences gave me a strong toolkit, including data analysis, marketing, public speaking, and relationship-building that now guide my work overseeing the entire enrollment cycle, financial aid, and family experience at an independent school.

After many great years in higher education, I was ready for something more connected and intimate. Independent schools give you the chance to shape not just the incoming class but also shape the everyday culture of a school and to work with students and families at such an important stage in their lives. I loved the idea of building deeper, longer-lasting relationships and seeing the results of our admission decisions every day, in the dining hall, on the athletic fields, in the classroom. This change also offered the chance to lead at a higher strategic level, combining marketing, admissions, and financial aid in ways that college admission roles rarely allow. It's been incredibly rewarding to bring the rigor and best practices of college admission to a school that values innovation, global reach, and personal connection.

College admission experience: [Pitzer College](#), [Caltech](#), and [University of Southern California](#).



Nate Lundy

Director of Enrollment
Management
*San Francisco University
High School (CA)*

My time in college admissions taught me all about the individualized approach to working with students and families. Everyone is looking for what is important to them, and it is our job to make sure everyone knows how we as an institution can not only support, but challenge students to get what they want out of the education. Not as relevant in the day school setting but managing travel and coordinating visits would have been a useful skill set for boarding recruitment. Lastly, I think collegiality and partnerships among peer schools and feeder schools often goes unnoticed. We share strategies and opportunities with peers so we all thrive. And developing meaningful relationships with sending school leaders is invaluable as they know the students and they know what we are looking for. Being on the road and developing relations in the college world has been a skill that has taken me a long way in the K-12 world.

I wanted to be in a smaller environment where I could work with students more closely, as an advisor, club leader, coach, etc. Not being on the road for 3-4 months a year was also appealing. This gave me more time to establish myself on campus and with the students I spent months recruiting. So often in the college world, I noticed I would spend months working with a student and their family and then never see them once they were on campus. Also, the pay was much better!

Previous K-12 experience: [Dean of Student Life and Teacher at Live Oak School \(CA\)](#), [Associate Director of Admissions, Coach, and Assistant Director of Athletics at Lick-Wilmerding High School \(CA\)](#), [Co-Director of Admissions at The Bay School of San Francisco \(CA\)](#). College admission experience: [Chapman University](#).



Carol Wasden

Director of Admission
and Financial Aid
Episcopal High School (TX)

All of them! How to greet students and parents with enthusiasm, how to plan an exciting event, how to read files and contribute to committee work - it's all relevant to independent school admission.

As much as I loved working on the college side, it was much less personal than my work today. Now, I get to walk alongside families as they go through the process, and I love seeing parents come back with younger siblings. I go from interviewing students to seeing their excitement about joining my school community to watching them grow and develop over the years. It's tremendously rewarding.

Previous K-12 experience: [Director of College Counseling at The Hockaday School \(TX\)](#), [Director of Academic Outreach, Naviance \(CO\)](#), and [Director of College Guidance at Hawken School \(OH\)](#). College admission experience: [Boston University](#).

Advancement



**Nancy Goldsmith
Caruso**

Director of Advancement
Cathedral High School (MA)

Among the many skills I had the good fortune to develop in college admission, and have served me well in every role, I highlight:

- Discipline- managing the pace of a demanding application review cycle builds self-discipline and time management skills.
- Flexibility- navigating the admission cycle, which varies each season and requires a unique skill set, prepares one well for iterative work.
- Public speaking- representing your school and tailoring the messaging to the diverse audiences you meet on campus or on their home turf, hones presentation skills
- Empathy and active listening- to represent and honor a student's story with authenticity, it is essential to create conditions where a student is heard and seen.
- Collaborative problem-solving- the application committee process reinforces the tenet that diverse teams yield the best results.

Working in independent schools allowed me to immerse myself in a school community and develop deeper relationships with students and those who support and care for them, while advancing the institution's mission in a meaningful way.

Previous K-12 experience: Assistant/Associate Head of School and Director of Admission and Financial Aid at Beaver Country Day School (MA), Assistant Head of School at Boston University Academy (MA), and Director of College Preparatory Schools Program at A Better Chance (MA). College experience: student affairs at Boston College and admission at Boston College and Connecticut College.



Cameron Pinckney

Director of
Individual Giving
Polytechnic School (CA)

Whether welcoming students or engaging donors, Admission and Advancement Officers do the same thing for the school--we build relationships that open doors to the future. One of the things that I found exciting about admission was its future focus. It taught me to look at how an incoming class would shape the next four years of the school. Advancement amplifies that forward-looking mentality tenfold. I now work to imagine what the institution might become tomorrow and decades from now, and I am privileged to help connect the people and resources that will realize the institution's vision.

After years of travelling professionally in higher education roles, working at independent schools has offered me the chance to stay rooted near my home community and present with my family while remaining balanced with the deeply engaging and meaningful work of pursuing excellence for an educational institution.

Previous experience: Director of Major & Planned Giving at Harvard-Westlake (CA), Associate Director, Leadership Giving and Associate Director of Annual Giving at Claremont McKenna College (CA), Associate Director of Annual Giving at Harvey Mudd College (CA). College admission work: Dartmouth College and California Institute of Technology.

If you are interested in making the transition from higher education to K-12 education, please contact the
Carney Sandoe Team at
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