

HIGHER EDUCATION

College admissions offices take on a new role: Coaxing accepted students to show up

How a buyer's market is transforming college admissions, even for students already admitted

by JON MARCUS February 3, 2026

Admissions counselors welcome admitted students to a presentation on the Augsburg University campus. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

MINNEAPOLIS — Kathy Cabrera Guaman not only survived the nail-biting process of applying to college; she got into three.

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This story also appeared in [Slate](#)

But the celebrations were short-lived. Now she was sitting somberly and absorbing how much work comes after that triumphant moment of acceptance and before she sets foot in a classroom in the fall.

For incoming students at most colleges and universities, this has long meant slogging through endless and complex steps they're left mostly on their own to figure out — financial aid, loans, majors, placement tests, class registration, housing, roommates, textbooks, a meal plan, health insurance, public transportation, immunizations.

That's what brought Guaman to a conference room in the admissions offices of Augsburg University, where she's decided to enroll and where admissions director Stacy Severson was walking her through those logistics.

Severson explained what Guaman's financial aid would and wouldn't cover, when to register for classes, where to look for outside scholarships — even which express bus to take to the campus if she chooses to commute.

The support Severson was offering is part of a surprisingly novel approach now being rolled out nationwide to try not only to make the process of admission simpler, but to enlist admissions officers as guides for students navigating the equally complex process that confronts them after that.

As generations of applicants to college have experienced, this is not the traditional role of admissions counselors, who have historically been sealed off behind closed doors and not available to help with any of these things — gatekeepers in a process seemingly meant to emphasize the exclusive nature of their institutions.

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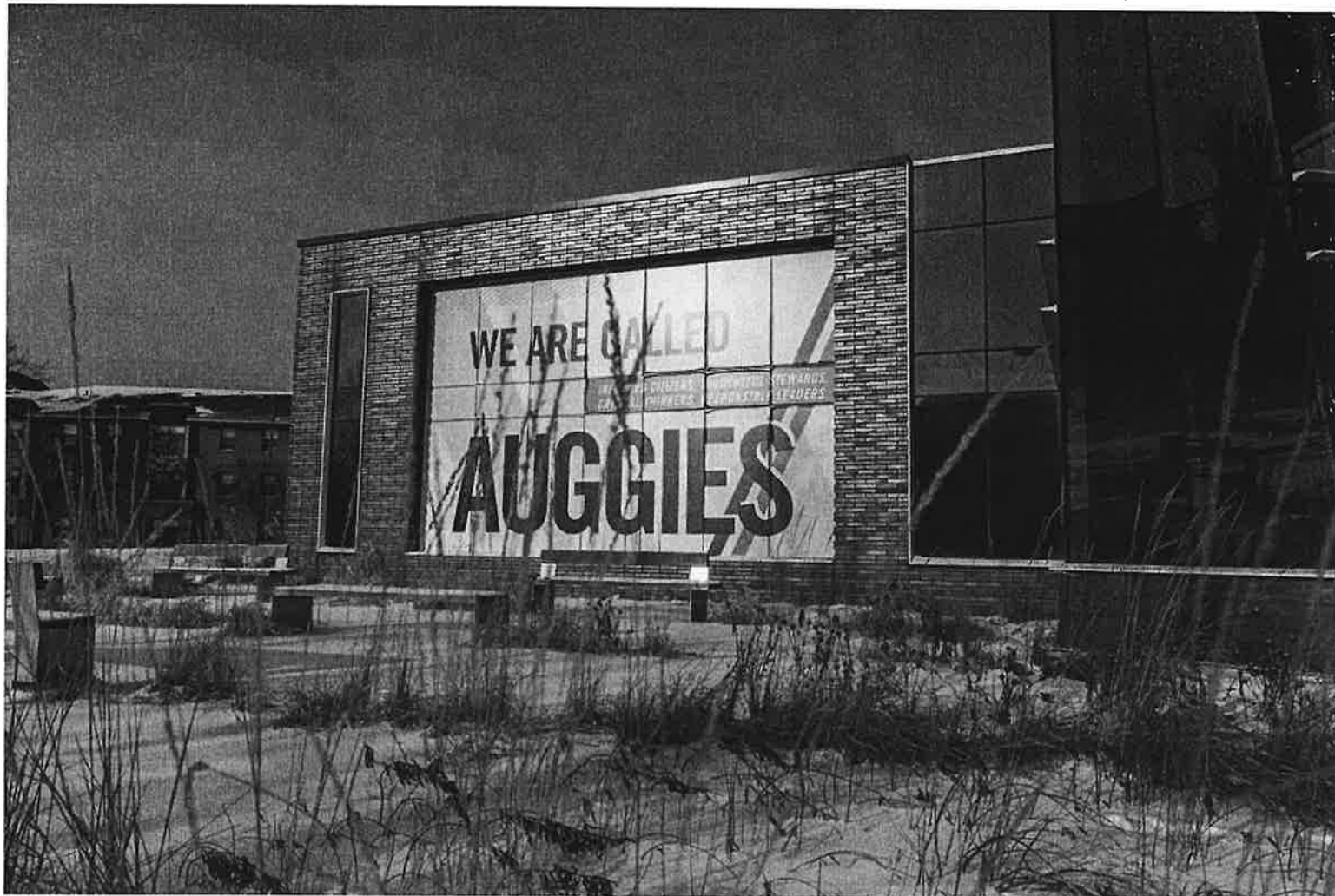
Accepted student Kathy Cabrera Guaman gets advice from Augsburg University admissions director Stacy Severson about registering for courses and paying for expenses once she starts school in the fall. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

But as university enrollment falls and Americans increasingly question the returns on a college education, once intimidating admissions offices are getting involved in making sure accepted students have what they need to actually show up.

“I was afraid to ask for help,” said Guaman, a high-scoring student at a high school in the Minneapolis suburb of Apple Valley who will be the first in her family to go to college. Until Severson reached out, “I had no idea what I was doing at all. It was scary.”

What’s been happening at Augsburg, called admissions success coaching, will be **rolled out nationwide** this year to an initial 10 to 15 additional schools through a pilot program managed by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, or NACAC, as part of what it calls a “reimagining” of the admissions process.

“It’s really a transformation of the admissions officer job,” said Paul Pribbenow, Augsburg’s president, in his office on the private campus of about 2,400 undergraduates. “In five years, the great majority of institutions will be doing some version of this.”



The campus of Augsburg University in Minneapolis, whose sports teams and students call themselves the Auggies. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

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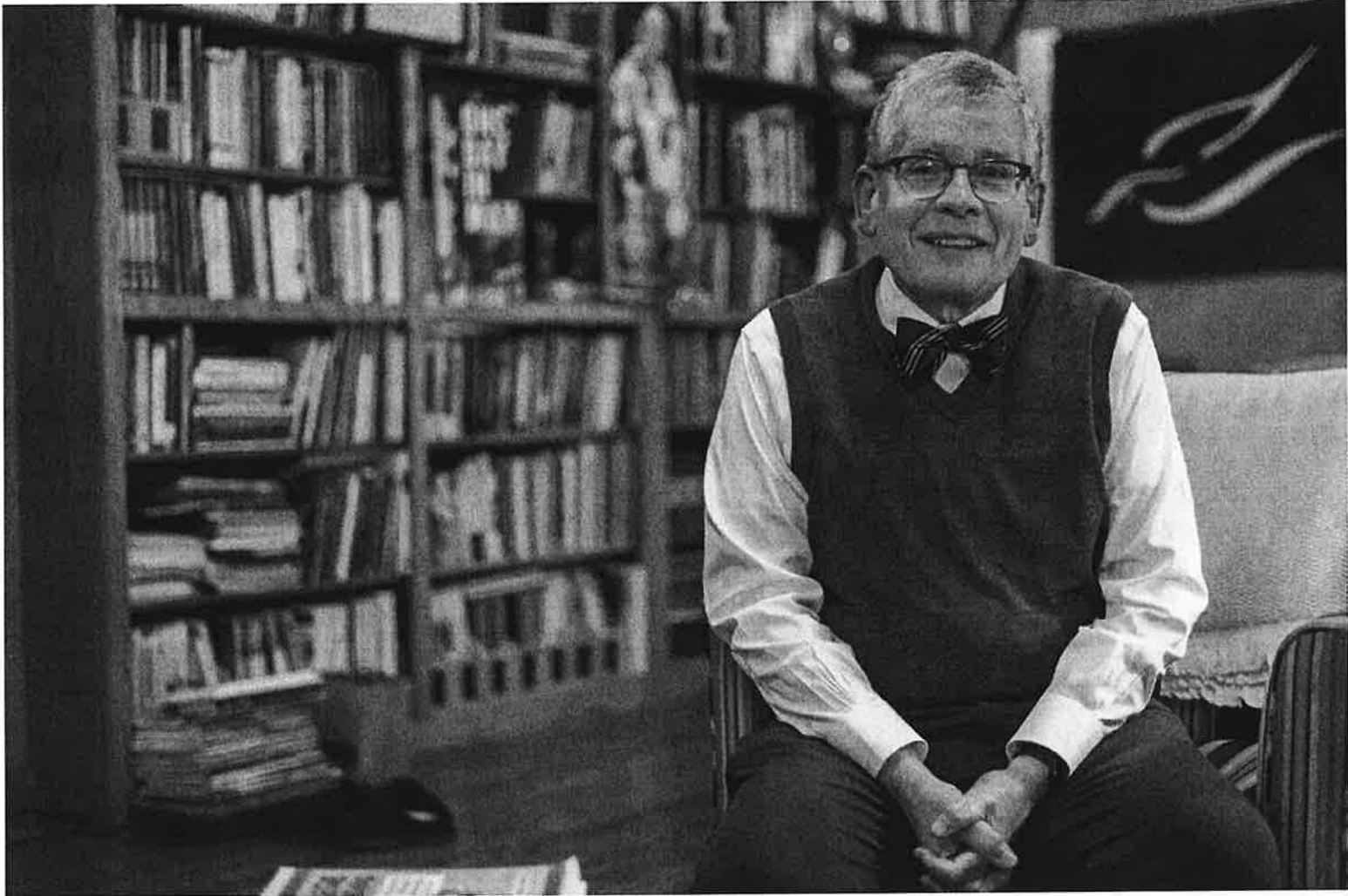
That's largely because the market has changed so much. Starting in the fall, the number of 18-year-old prospective first-year college students will [begin a long decline](#). The proportion of high school graduates going directly to college is also way down, from a peak of 70 percent in 2016 [to 62 percent in 2022](#), the most recent year for which the figure is available from the U.S. Department of Education. And the proportion of accepted students who actually enroll — called, by admissions professionals, the “yield” — [has been slipping](#), according to NACAC.

These dramatic shifts are pushing up [acceptance rates](#) — and changing the standoffish culture of admission.

“Some admissions offices don’t even post their admissions officers’ names or contact information,” said Erwin Hesse, director of NACAC’s new Center for Innovation in College Admission. “There’s this mysterious handoff that happens, when there’s a bunch of students who still haven’t decided whether they’re coming to

your college, and the only answer that you have for them is, 'We've already admitted you. Go talk to your academic adviser.' ”

The admissions process, said Hesse, a former admissions officer himself, “feels like it’s overwhelming for no reason. We’re expecting way too much of 17-year-olds.” Now, he said, “everyone is on board to make it less complicated, and to remove as many barriers as possible.”

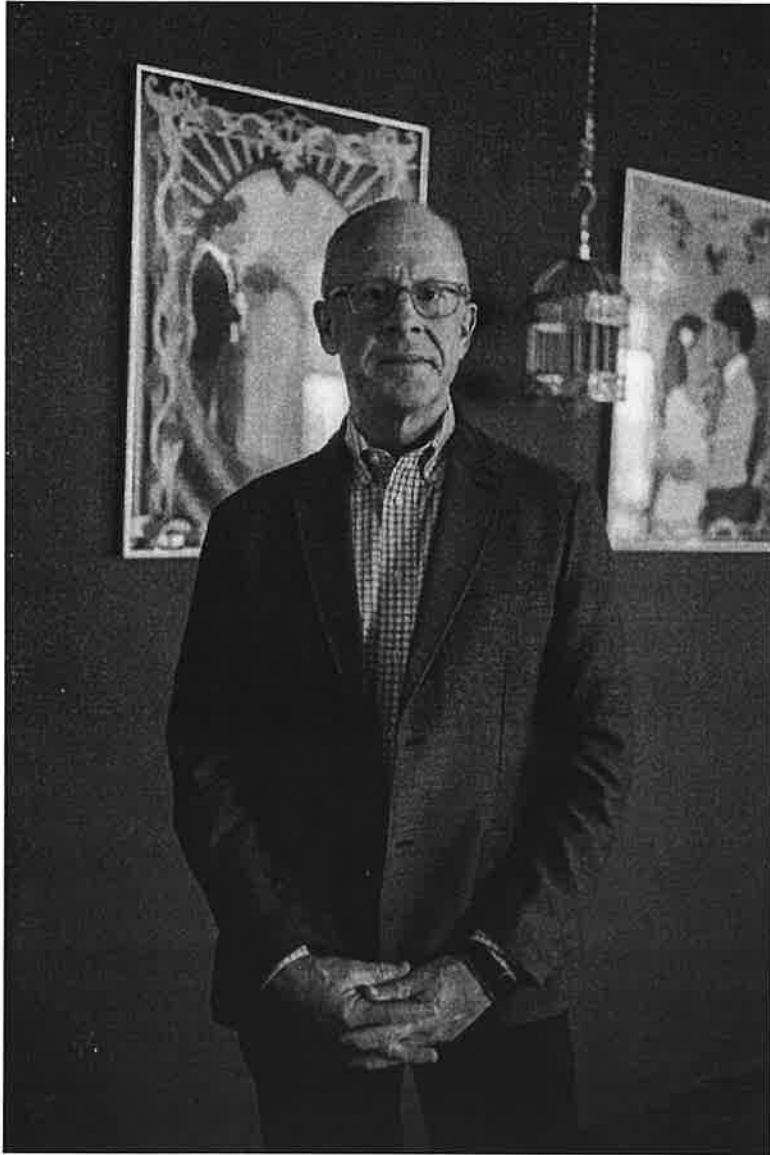


Paul Pribbenow, president of Augsburg University. “In five years, the great majority of institutions will be doing some version of this,” he says of the university’s admissions success coaching program. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

Many universities have adopted “direct admission,” in which students who meet certain academic requirements are accepted without even applying. More than 400,000 students were offered direct admission for the last academic year, according to the National College Attainment Network.

Meanwhile, schools including Virginia Tech are starting to use artificial intelligence to help read undergraduate admissions essays.

Both of these developments are freeing up time for once-invisible admissions officers to come out of their offices and help the students they've accepted follow through and enroll. At Augsburg, for example, direct admission has cleared the equivalent of a collective 48 hours a week off admissions officers' schedules, said Robert Gould, vice president for strategic enrollment management.



Robert Gould, vice president for strategic enrollment management at Augsburg University. "Deeper relationships create demand," he says of the unusually hands-on process for helping admitted students there. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

"They work as a recruitment tool."

At a presentation on the campus on a subzero Minnesota morning, where accepted and prospective students in hoodies or sportcoats yawned and stretched while their parents guzzled coffee and picked at miniature breakfast pastries, there appeared to be as much goodwill for Augsburg as there were complaints about the treatment people had received from the admissions offices at other universities and colleges. Parents and

The scope of the culture shift that's happening is symbolized by the slogan the university has attached to this work. Instead of applying to Augsburg, it tells students, "Augsburg Applies to You."

That doesn't just mean helping them enroll at Augsburg. In coaching sessions on the same day Kathy Cabrera Guaman was meeting with admissions director Stacy Severson, admissions counselors encouraged some accepted students to go back and take a second look at other colleges they were considering, to be sure of their decisions.

"Definitely go visit again," one, Phil Sauer, told high school senior Kaden Sheldon, who was still choosing between another university and Augsburg. "Then just figure out what's best for you."

Wherever students go, said Gould, that kind of benevolence can leave them with a good impression of Augsburg they might share with college-bound classmates and younger siblings.

Related: Colleges ease the dreaded admissions process as the supply of applicants declines

"Deeper relationships create demand," Gould said.

students also universally bemoaned the lack of help they got from high school college counselors, who handle caseloads averaging 405 students apiece, according to NACAC.

By comparison, “these guys have been very friendly,” Barbara Young said of the admissions officers at Augsburg, where she had come with her daughter, Kealy, a high school junior.

At Augsburg, “the first thing that happened is that the admissions officer came over and introduced herself, and that has not happened anywhere else,” said Kristen Campos of Chicago, who was visiting the school with her husband and their student.

When their older children went through the same process at a big state university, Campos said disdainfully, the admissions office doors were closed to them. “We never spoke to an admissions officer,” she said.

Colleges and universities can only benefit by making time to ease applicants’ doubts, said Pribbenow, the president of Augsburg.

“There are a whole lot of students that would come to you if you would help them see themselves at your school,” he said.



Parents Marco and Kristen Campos and their student, Jay, at an admissions presentation at Augsburg University. “The first thing that happened is that the admissions officer came over and introduced herself, and that has not happened anywhere else,” Kristen Campos says. Credit: Jaida Grey Eagle for The Hechinger Report

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Back at Augsburg’s office of admissions, Severson was wrapping up her time with Guaman.

They talked about how to find some classmates who might want to carpool to the campus once school starts, and split the \$195-per-semester parking fee. That class registration for the fall begins in May. Which days and at what hours to schedule classes, if Guaman decides to continue to work part-time. How one of her employers, a fast-food chain, offers scholarships to its employees that could help her pay for textbooks and other costs. Whether to take out student loans.

As they wrapped up, Severson made sure Guaman had her email address and number.

“Remember, I’m just a phone call or text or email away. You won’t be rid of me yet,” she said. “I’m here to help you.”

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