



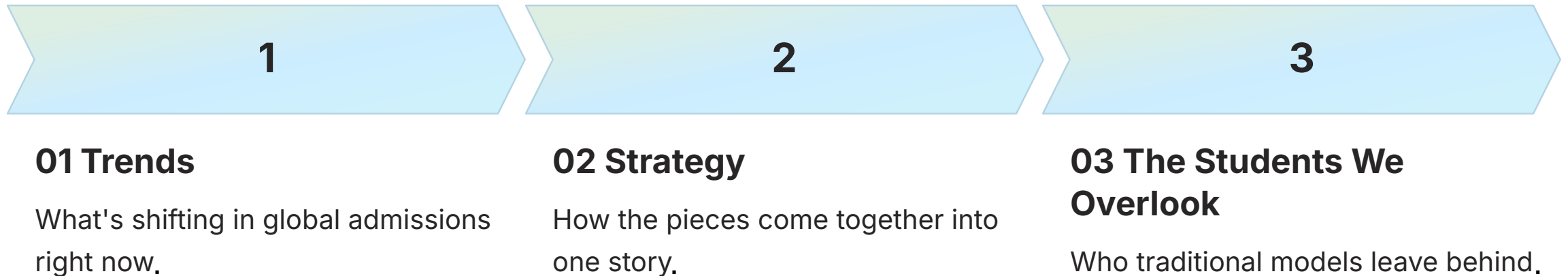
Navigating Global Admissions

Trends, Strategy, and the Students We Overlook

Kristi Steele · Founder, KC360 · kc360.co

University applications don't have to be chaotic.

But right now, in this landscape, they usually are. And the students who pay for it most are the ones who don't fit the traditional counseling office mold.



01 — TRENDS

What's Actually Shifting in Global Admissions

Not theory. What's happening — right now, across markets, across systems.



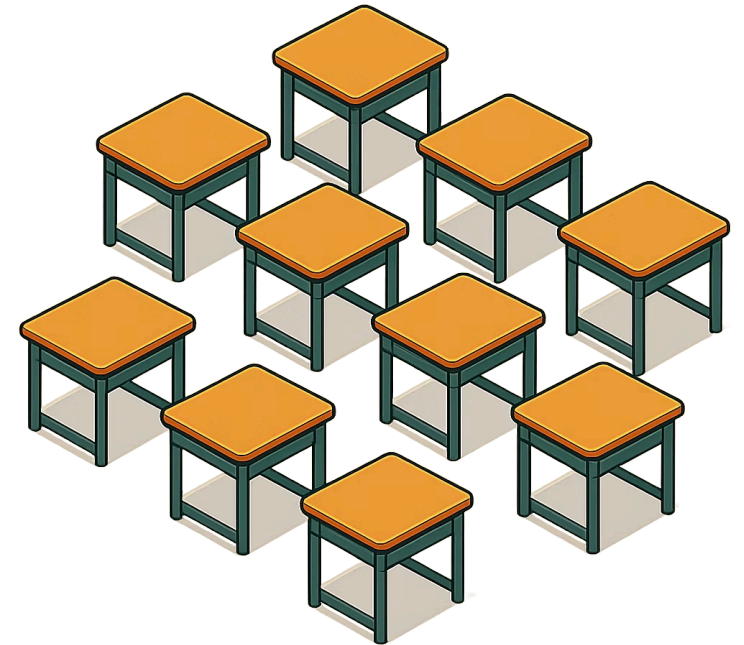
More Applications. Fewer Graduates to Go Around.

Early Decision Surge

ED volume now **exceeds regular decision volume** — students are committing sooner, compressing the cycle for everyone. *Source: Admissions Village, 2025.*

2025: Peak Enrollment Year

Projected as the high-water mark for U.S. high school graduates — with **steep declines ahead** in the Northeast and Midwest. *Source: WICHE / Inside Higher Ed, 2026.*



Selectivity Is Shifting — and So Is How It's Measured

1 Test-Blind Consequences

One UC went test-blind in 2020. At UCSD, students unqualified for precalculus jumped from **0.5% to 12%** of the freshman class. *Source: NYT Editorial Board, July 2026.*

2 Selective Schools Are Reinstating Testing

Brown, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Yale, Caltech, UT Austin, Georgia Tech, Purdue, and the service academies have all reversed course.

3 International Applications: Down Overall, Up at Selectives

A **9% overall decline** in international applications — but demand at highly selective institutions is rising. *Source: Admissions Village, 2025.*

7.3M

Students Studied Abroad in 2024

Nearly **triple** the figure from two decades ago. *Source: UNESCO Higher Education Global Trends Report, cited in Times Higher Education, 2026.*

A Wider World — With Tighter Borders

Traditional destination countries — the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia — are tightening visa and immigration policy. The result: students are being pushed toward a **wider range of destinations** than ever before.

For counselors, this means the competitive landscape is no longer defined by a handful of countries. Global mobility is real, but so is global friction.

Source: Times Higher Education, September 2026.

02 — STRATEGY

How the Pieces Come Together Into One Story

A story that travels across borders, systems, and readers who may have never seen the student's context before.



Five Pieces, One Story



Academics

The foundation everything else builds on. Rigor, trajectory, and context matter equally.



Activities

Depth over volume. A resume of unrelated lines tells no story.



Essays

The student's own voice — not a translated transcript. Specific, lived detail that AI cannot invent.



Recommendations

Written by people who actually know the student — not titles or proximity.



Timing

Deadlines that respect time zones, school calendars, and travel realities.

AI Has Changed What an Essay Proves



Faculty Are Alarmed

Over 1,500 STEM faculty and 700+ humanities faculty at UC signed letters urging a return to standardized testing — citing AI's erosion of essay reliability.

Source: NYT Editorial Board, July 2026.

Hold the Line Harder

This is not a reason to abandon the essay. It is a reason to demand the **specific, lived detail an AI cannot invent.** That specificity is exactly what makes an essay trustworthy again.

Recommendations and Interviews Rise

Where they exist, they now carry more relative weight. They are significantly harder to fabricate than a polished personal statement.

For Internationally Mobile Students: The Story Has to Travel

1 First Impressions Shift

A "dream university" impression formed at a fair often changes once a family compares programs, finances, and post-graduation support in their home context.

3 Context Needs Translation

Activities described in a home country context may be invisible to a reader who has never encountered that context. Translate the significance, not just the words.

2 Recommenders Need the Framework

Overseas recommenders may not know the U.S. rubric. Give them the framework — not just the form.

4 Confirm Aid and Timelines Early

Financial aid access, testing availability, and deadlines vary school by school. Confirm in the spring — not in November.

American Style, Without the Full Move

Branch Campuses as a Real Third Option

For a family torn between studying in the U.S. and staying close to home, a branch campus is not a consolation prize. It is a genuine third option worth evaluating seriously.

Ask: What degree is awarded? Is mobility to the main campus guaranteed? Who is teaching? What are the employability signals?

Drake University and Florida State University's Panama campus — both American-style, English-taught — are represented at this very conference.

Source: Times Higher Education, September 2026.



03 — THE STUDENTS WE OVERLOOK

The Students These Trends Hit Hardest — and Discuss Least



Not Every Student Has a Counseling Office Behind Them

Expats

Moving schools, systems, and sometimes languages mid-process. No single counselor follows them across the transition.

Homeschoolers

No school profile. No counselor letter. No built-in timeline. The entire infrastructure of a traditional application has to be built from scratch.

Hybrid Learners

Split across platforms, transcripts, and sometimes countries. Their record doesn't fit a single box.

Under-Resourced Schools

One counselor serving hundreds of students. College admissions is a side task — not a dedicated role.

What Gets in the Way

- No one tracking deadlines for them.
- No school profile to hand a college.
- Limited exposure to college reps and fairs.
- Inconsistent access to standardized testing.
- A family navigating the process for the first time — in a second language.
- Not knowing when a transcript needs translation and credential evaluation.

□ These are not edge cases. They are patterns — and they compound.

THE STUDENTS WE OVERLOOK

What Actually Works



Meet Them Where They Are

Expat networks, homeschool co-ops, online communities — not the inbox of a counseling office that may not exist.



Give Tools That Don't Assume a School Profile

Design for the student who is building the application infrastructure themselves.



Build Trust Before You Build a Checklist

These families need to believe the process is navigable before they engage with any tool or timeline.



Keep Communication Low-Barrier

No login walls. No jargon. Follow up — once is not enough for a family doing this alone.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 Universities: Beyond the Brand Name



Schools Are Competing — Actively

The average cost to recruit one student at a private four-year institution is **\$2,795** — up 32% since 2020. That is real money spent to get your student in the door. *Source: RNL / Inside Higher Ed, 2026.*

Mentorship Predicts Flourishing

Students with a mentor who encouraged them, and professors who made learning exciting, had **more than double the odds of thriving** later in life. *Source: Gallup / Inside Higher Ed, 2026.*

Reframe the Language

"Safety school" becomes **"the school competing for your student."** Merit aid can make tier two or three genuinely cheaper than the so-called affordable flagship.

40%

of private colleges are running a deficit right now

Average tuition discount: a record **56.3%**. About **400 colleges** are projected to close or merge this decade.

Source: Admissions Village, 2025.

Sector-Wide Context — Not a Verdict on Any Single School

Financial health and prestige are not the same axis. A well-run tier two school can be steadier than a struggling flagship.

Ask the question. Don't assume the answer.

"Flat is the new growth." — **Wayne Webster, President, Albion College**. On choosing steady over prestige-driven growth. *Source: Inside Higher Ed, September 2026.*

Lebanon Valley College hit its highest-ever undergraduate enrollment in fall 2025 — without a larger incoming class. Stability is buildable. *Source: Inside Higher Ed, September 2026.*

The High Schools Nobody Visits

Not the flagship schools every rep already knows. The ones down the road from them.

1 Invitations Go to the Same Schools Every Cycle

Being left off the fair list is not a reflection of student ability. It's a reflection of whose relationships already existed.

3 A Table Visit Is Often Enough

Most schools can't host a full fair — but most can host a table. That is often enough to start the relationship. Relationships compound over a career. The way in is a single email. *Source: Times Higher Education, July 2026.*

2 One Counselor, Every Role

The counselor at this school also handles discipline, academics, and everything else. College admissions is one more task — not a dedicated function.

4 Collaboration Is a Real Option

A tier two or three school can send students to a fair hosted by a more resourced neighbor — or run its own application workshop for students and parents, no formal counseling office required.

A Toolkit for Every Person in the Room

Full toolkit available as a companion resource. Details at the end of this session.



Trends One Pager

The global admissions landscape at a glance — ready to share with families or colleagues.



Story Framework Worksheet

The five pieces — academics, activities, essays, recommendations, timing — mapped for one student.



Outreach Checklist

Practical steps for reaching invisible students — expats, homeschoolers, and under-resourced schools.



Readiness Timeline

What to do — and when — across the full admissions cycle, accounting for international realities.



Questions.

And the objections you hear most from families. Let's troubleshoot a few together.

Kristi Steele

kristi@kc360.co · 1 205 490 8236

Founder, KC360 · [kc360.co](https://planner.kc360.co)

<https://planner.kc360.co>