



2025 Regional Council Election Candidate

Region 7

Name: Jennifer Tassell

Professional Title: Head of College and Careers

Institution/Organization: International School of Panama

Country of Residence: Panama

Member Group: Secondary (High School)

Applicant Questions

Explain your motivation for pursuing a leadership role with International ACAC, as well as why this position in particular. Highlight how your leadership experience and involvement with the organization make you a strong fit for the role..

When I first started as a school-based counselor 18 years ago, I felt isolated. With only one other counselor at my school and little professional network, I lacked a sense of community. That changed when I connected with international counselors and university representatives in the region who offered mentorship and support. Their warmth and guidance helped me fall in love with this profession. It reminded me that it's the connections we make, with each other, that truly light up our work.

Being part of the Latin America & Caribbean network, International ACAC, and founding the Panama Counselor Association have been transformational for me. These spaces have allowed me to grow professionally and personally, and I want to give back to the community that helped shape me.

I hesitated to apply because I'm a "Pana-Gringa", born in Panama to U.S. parents, and I don't visually represent what many expect from someone in Latin America. But Panama is my home, my birthplace, and a deep part of who I am. I'm committed to this region and honored by the possibility of representing it.

Over the past 10+ years, I've been actively engaged in our regional community, often working in ways that already align with the responsibilities of the Regional Rep. I've taken on various roles within International ACAC, from conference presenter to committee service to organizing the first Latin American regional conference, and those experiences have deepened my understanding of the organization's mission and values.

I only want to be considered for this position if I am truly the best fit. Our region is rich with incredible talent and leadership. If chosen, I would bring not only deep regional experience, but also a collaborative, community-focused approach to the role. This position feels like a natural extension of the work I've already been doing, and I would be proud to serve and amplify the voices of our diverse and vibrant region.

Drawing from your previous experience in volunteering and leadership, how have these roles equipped you with the skills and insights necessary for the Founding Regional Representative position? Please highlight your leadership philosophy and strategies for effectively managing and leading a volunteer committee, with a focus on communication, collaboration, and recognition. Additionally, share specific accomplishments that demonstrate your ability to build professional communities, mentor emerging leaders, and promote inclusive and culturally responsive practices—key responsibilities of this role.

Over the years, I've leaned into leadership not for recognition, but to solve problems, build connections, and serve the needs of our region. As the founder of the PASCA Panama Counselor Network, I created www.panamacounselors.com, which has become a model for other countries to support visiting university representatives. I also serve as the Panama Ambassador in the LATAM Chat (initiated by Emily Dobson), sit on the BMI/Times Higher Education Counselor Advisory Board representing Latin America and the Caribbean, and annually organize the O2O University Fair. Through O2O, we've partnered with Mexico, Costa Rica, and others to align calendars and maximize university visits. A personal dream was to turn O2O into a non-profit to fund HALI student scholarships, and as of this year, we are officially an NGO and beginning to award scholarships and build partnerships for O2O-specific awards.

These leadership roles, though often requiring sacrifice, have taught me that service brings deeper connection, growth, and impact. My leadership style is collaborative and inclusive. I don't believe in speaking over others; I believe in lifting them up. This year, we were able to nominate a scholar from Panama, someone working directly with HALI students, to attend an International ACAC in Boston. Watching her growth has been one of the most rewarding moments of my year.

Much of my passion for leadership stems from knowing what it's like to feel like an outsider. Though I was born and raised in Panama, my U.S. background and upbringing in the former Canal Zone meant I didn't learn Spanish until adulthood. In the U.S., I didn't feel fully American. In Panama, I don't always look or sound the part. That duality used to bring imposter syndrome. But through this professional community, I found belonging, purpose, and confidence. I want to be that source of connection for others, especially for those who may not see themselves represented.

Even if not chosen, I will continue this work. But being voted Counselor of the Year twice, by

IC3 and Times Higher Education, reminded me that passion, perseverance, and humility are noticed. I bring all three to this role and would be honored to serve.

As a Founding Regional Representative for International ACAC, how would you outline your understanding of the role, including the priority areas you would focus on, your overall vision for the region, and the challenges you anticipate addressing? Additionally, what innovative solutions would you propose to strengthen all regional networks, enhance member engagement, and improve communication between members, the Council, and the Board, while acknowledging current practices or programs you find effective?

I would never presume to fully understand every counselor's challenges across such a diverse region—I'm just one person in a small country of four million. However, I stand on the shoulders of leaders in our region, and I know where to go, and who to ask, to learn what matters most to our members. My first priority would be listening. With the help of other Regional Representatives, we could create and share a multilingual survey to better understand members' lived experiences and needs across Latin America and the Caribbean. This would be paired with outreach to country-level leaders, ensuring we gather perspectives from as many contexts as possible, whether they are school based, community organizations, independent counselors, or universiti.

We've already seen the power of this kind of collaboration when myself and 10 counselors from seven different countries came together to document and report unethical and illegal practices in our region. That 15-page confidential report, shared with IACAC, NACAC, and AMISA, was only possible because of strong relationships, trust, and a shared commitment to professional ethics. I would bring the same spirit to my work as Regional Representative, using collective knowledge to inform best practices and protect the integrity of our profession.

I believe continuing to encourage professional membership by promoting International ACAC and other professional organizations as a way to raise standards, access resources, and build credibility in the region. Also, supporting regional events such as assisting in planning and promoting conferences, workshops, and mini-fairs to make professional development more accessible to those who can't always attend global events. This is what we do at O2O, we invite counselors from parts of Panama that do not get visits and bring those counselors in. We also invited counselors from neighboring countries.

Some challenges could be geographic and linguistic diversity, which can make equitable engagement difficult. This could be eased by launching "regional listening posts" through quarterly online meetups to surface emerging needs. Through the Latam network they have already creating a shared resource library with templates, ethical guidelines, and professional development opportunities, contributed to by members of the group increasing access to everyone. Other regions could piggyback on the amazing work that has already been done, which I cannot take credit for.

As a Founding Regional Representative, advocacy for international students is central to International ACAC's mission. Identify a critical issue in college admissions or international education that you would prioritize addressing in your region. Explain its significance, the potential impact on students and institutions, and how you would

collaborate with regional and global stakeholders to drive meaningful change.

One critical issue I would prioritize is the lack of accessible, transparent scholarship resources for international students in our region, paired with the corruption that, in some countries, prevents deserving students from accessing the few opportunities that do exist. In Panama, I have seen talented students miss life-changing chances due to these barriers.

A solution I envision is a regional scholarship clearinghouse, a shared, up-to-date database of country-specific scholarships, regional programs, and university-funded opportunities, including affordable 2+2 pathways. This would be built collaboratively with other Regional Representatives, universities, and trusted school-based and independent counselors, ensuring the information is both accurate and widely accessible. Many neighboring countries are unaware of opportunities in each other's markets, and sharing this knowledge can have a ripple effect.

Latin America has often been overlooked, yet in the past five years, interest from universities has grown, not only in large markets like Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, but also in smaller countries. What benefits students in Panama can benefit those in Costa Rica, and beyond. This is about more than access, it's about equity. Opportunities must reach HALI students as well as those from more affluent schools. Our students are the future leaders of our countries. By giving them access to global education and diverse perspectives, we equip them to return home as changemakers, leaders who can prevent corruption, manage conflict, and inspire the next generation.

Explain how you would use this position to advance International ACAC's strategic plan by aligning your top three priorities with the organization's three pillars: enhancing member experience globally, clarifying the international brand, and optimizing internal operations.

I believe I have already addressed all three pillars in my earlier responses, but here is how my work and ideas align:

Enhancing member experience globally: Building on my commitment to listening first, I would focus on creating structured feedback channels such as regional surveys, virtual forums, and collaboration with country leaders to ensure member needs from all parts of Latin America and the Caribbean are represented. Strengthening ethical practices and supporting HALI students alongside those from well-resourced schools will remain central to this effort.

Clarifying the international brand: By promoting a regional scholarship clearinghouse and highlighting opportunities like 2+2 programs, I would help position our region as a source of high-achieving, globally-minded students beyond the typical recruitment markets. This reinforces International ACAC's role as a bridge between institutions and the diverse talent across our region.

Optimizing internal operations: I would leverage existing communication tools while introducing more immediate, member-driven channels and shared resource libraries. This is the area where I seek the most guidance and learning, as I want to better understand internal processes.

I acknowledge that while I may not be the perfect candidate, I have many ideas, and although some may be ambitious, I recognize that follow-through may not always be possible due to unforeseen barriers or time commitments. My communication style is transparent and sometimes unfiltered, but it has served me well so far. I am committed to learning and growing while bringing my authentic self to the role.

Through all three pillars, my approach is collaborative, regionally inclusive, and focused on both the integrity of our profession and the future of our students. Whatever I do to contribute will be in the spirit of humility: we are all here to learn and serve, to strengthen our networks, and to make our region more visible to the global community.