

Blackburn Award: 2026

Known widely as a consummate host with a perpetual smile, Barbara Conner blazed her own professional trail while doing it all. She has worked in public schools, independent schools, and on the college side. She has retired and returned to the profession.

Although this might amaze many who have seen her professional leadership, Barbara came to education as a second, or maybe even third, career. After working in city government in Fairfax County and as a consultant, Barbara began her first job in the Fairfax County Public Schools in 1997. Even then, though, Barbara did not truly enter the college admission/counseling world until 2005 when she became a College and Career Center Specialist at West Potomac High School.

After 6 years, Barbara moved to an independent school, Foxcroft, where she was the Director of College Counseling for the next twelve. Then, she crossed sides of the desk-- notably going the reverse direction of many professionals-- to join Franklin & Marshall's admission office for 2 1/2 years before "retiring." However, we should have known retirement would not last long as Barbara announced late this fall that she was joining Rider University as a part-time, regional admission counselor.

What makes Barbara special, though, is not the journey; but what she accomplished during her career. Here are some highlights:

- Early on, she co-wrote several grants with another Blackburn winner, Sue Rexford, to provide Fairfax County public school students free test preparation.
- Working at a girl's school, Barbara became an advocate for young women in the process including presenting at a GenHerAtion/Girls School Day Trust.
- While on the high school side, she developed and advocated the "*Five First-Choice Colleges*" approach, including publishing an article on the topic in the Spring 2015 NACAC Journal.
- Barbara demonstrated a willingness to share her knowledge with other professionals presenting at Virginia Association for Independent Schools conference, participating in PCACAC's Anchor Exchange and presenting on a range of topics at P(C)ACAC affiliates conferences, virtual programs and summer events. Please note, I say affiliates because she presented at both our PCACAC with a silent C and that other PACAC to our north.
- Behind the scenes, Barbara has been a tireless leader supporting her colleagues. She chaired multiple sub-committees for our regional conferences and was the 2023 NACAC Conference Hospitality co-chair.

- Barbara's affiliate work went beyond conferences. She served PCACAC on the Professional Development committee, Current Trends and Future Issues committee, as a NACAC Delegate, and on the PCACAC. She also chaired or co-chaired three Summer Institutes.
- As inaugural director of Admission Visit Experience at Franklin and Marshall, Barbara graciously welcomed countless students and families to campus. I can first-hand attest to her opening the office after-hours for a family (maybe, my son and I) who arrived late hoping to find self-guided tour information.

In all these situations and more, Barbara forged her way with a clear focus on ethical practices and equity, caring most about how her actions could support the students, families, and institutions she served.

Her supervisor at Franklin and Marshall wrote, *"Our team was able to witness firsthand her passion for serving students. In moving to a campus-based role, Barbara's commitment to student access and ethical leadership in our profession became more profound. In her roles, Barbara was able to broaden her impact on classes of high school students, as well as professionals across the region. Barbara is someone who truly embodies the spirit of the Jack Blackburn award."*

I could not agree more and am honored to introduce Barbara Conner as this year's Jack Blackburn Award recipient.

Presented by: Jake Talmage