

April 2025 Ethical Navigation: A Late Offer

The Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling (PCACAC) is excited to present *Ethical Navigations*, an educational effort to proactively explore issues that might face professionals involved in the college admissions process. This month's Ethical Navigation was submitted by Anne Greenspoon, Director of College Counseling at Melvin J Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, MD.

Each month, *Ethical Navigations* explores a hypothetical scenario and potential avenues to approaching the situation using [NACAC's Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission](#) as the lens. This guide is built on the *principles* of honesty, transparency, equity, and respect for students and fellow professionals while including the *core values* of education, access and equity, professionalism, collegiality, collaboration, trust, and social responsibility.

This month's scenario:

Robin Bluebird, Director of College Guidance at Bird's Nest High School, is faced with a dilemma. Her student, Lily Mayflowers, is a high-need, first generation college student and her family is very excited that she will be attending Olive Tree State University. Though Olive Tree State was not her first choice, after receiving and evaluating multiple financial aid packages, Lily and her family determined it was the most affordable option. She finally made her decision and sent in her \$500 admission deposit.

Rainbow University, a prestigious and expensive private university, is having a challenging year with their yield. April Showers, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, has been directed by their Dean of Enrollment to reevaluate the financial aid packages for their most promising admits to "sweeten the offer" and entice students to make a commitment to their school.

On May 5, Lily Mayflowers runs into Robin Bluebird's office, and she is bursting with excitement. She informs Robin that she has received a revised financial aid offer from Rainbow University and it is "a pot of gold." The new financial aid offer makes attending Rainbow even more affordable than Olive Tree State. Lily asks Robin how she should go about letting Olive Tree know that she no longer wants to attend. She also asks Robin if it is possible to get the \$500 deposit back from Olive Tree so that she can use that money to pay the mandatory \$500 deposit at Rainbow.

What can Robin do? How can she help Lily Mayflowers? And does she confront her colleague April Showers at Rainbow about enticing baby birds from the nest of Olive Tree?

The Conundrum:

Robin Bluebird believes in empowering students to be ethical by making only one enrollment commitment. Lily's family stretched to pay the non-refundable deposit to Olive Tree, and paying the additional \$500 deposit to Rainbow will be difficult for the family. Robin is also upset that April Showers at Rainbow University is trying to lure baby birds from the nest of Olive Tree.

Possible approach:

While Robin Bluebird is unhappy that Rainbow University put her student in an untenable financial position (to afford a second enrollment deposit), she is happy for Lily that she can now afford to attend her dream school. Unfortunately, in today's admission process, this scenario or something similar could be a reality for some students, families, and their counselor. At the time, when Lily and her family chose to deposit at Olive Tree State, they did so by May 1 in good faith, taking into account all that they knew.

Now, though, after May 1, new information has changed their thought processes and the student is continuing to want to operate in good faith. NACAC does provide some advice. According to GEPCA Article 1, B. 1. B) iii, *“To provide college admission counseling in the best interest of students, members should: educate students and families of their ethical responsibilities in the admissions process including counseling students that it is unethical to: maintain an active enrollment deposit or the equivalent at more than one US college.”*

Thus, Robin Bluebird could encourage Lily and her family to think about the ramifications of changing college commitments. Furthermore, if Lily does change, Robin Bluebird would want to encourage Lily to withdraw from Olive Tree as soon as possible. However, knowing the financial strain that \$500 will be a difficult burden, Robin Bluebird could try to help.

Robin Bluebird, or Lily and her parents, could consider the following:

- While this will not help with the immediate cash flow issue for Lily and her family, compare the four-year costs as well as any special programs available from each school to allow the family to consider whether the \$500 enrollment deposit is a significant part of the final decision process.
- Consider asking Olive Tree State if they would reconsider the financial aid package. While not Lily's first-choice college, a new package might further complicate the conversation in a good way.
- Reach out to Olive Tree State to advocate that the university release her from her enrollment commitment and request an exception to refund her deposit due to her financial circumstances.
- Contact April Showers at Rainbow University to inquire if the university can reduce or waive their enrollment deposit amount given Lily's financial need.

Decisions about enrollment deposit refunds or reductions will ultimately be made by each college individually, but Robin Bluebird can feel confident that she pursued opportunities to support her student.

If you have any questions feedback, or proposals for future Ethical Navigations, please contact info@pcacac.org. Do you have a question about NACAC's recommended ethical practices or a suggested revision to the [Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission](#)? Please submit via [this form](#) and a member of the national AP committee will follow up with you.