

December 2025 Ethical Navigation: Early Decision Festivus

[The Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling \(PCACAC\) Admission Practices Committee](#) is excited to present *Ethical Navigations (EN)*, an educational effort to proactively explore issues that might face professionals involved in the college admissions process. This month's EN was submitted by Jake Talmage, Director of College Counseling at St. Paul's School for Boys (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](#) (GEPAC) 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:

As the holidays approached, counselor Cosmo Kramer at Festivus High School looked forward to a long-needed nap. However, before holiday break could arrive, he knew many students would be receiving decisions from Early Action (EA), Early Decision (ED), and Rolling admission decisions. Mr. Kramer often felt these decisions were a roller-coaster: the ups of celebrating exciting acceptance news, the downs of denials, and the on-going ride of deferrals. At any time, Mr. Kramer knew a student could burst through the office door with a decision.

Suddenly, his energetic but pragmatic student, Elaine, came in with a great smile on her face, stating, "I was admitted Early Decision to Seinfeld University!"

Kramer was excited for Elaine as he knew SU was Elaine's top choice. However, after congratulating her on the acceptance, Elaine continued, "I also was admitted to Costanza University with a \$6,000 Klompus Scholarship. And, I am waiting to hear from our state school. Now, my parents want me to apply to Newman College—they offered a fee waiver and said I will qualify for scholarship."

Mr. Kramer is surprised by Elaine's statement as he had discussed the binding implications of Early Decision with Elaine when she, her parents, and he signed the ED agreement. At the time, everyone seemed to understand the binding nature of Early Decision and felt cost was not the decision maker. Now, the situation seems to have changed.

What can Mr. Kramer do? What advice might the guide provide him?

The Conundrum:

Mr. Kramer signed the Early Decision approval/agreement in good faith knowing that Seinfeld University was Elaine's top choice. Even though he had confirmed with her that she planned to withdraw other applications and enroll if admitted as stated in the [Common Application's Early Decision agreement](#), Elaine and her family now seem to have other plans. Mr. Kramer feels caught in the middle between supporting the signed Early Decision form or Elaine's continued college application process. In addition, he wonders about student privacy, transcript ownership, and school policy.

Possible Approach:

Based on the above situation, the possible approach seems like it may be straight forward, but as is often the case, there are many issues.

Mr. Kramer has and continues to educate Elaine and her family about the binding nature of Early Decision, which is what the Guide encourages in Article I B I b) *“To provide college admission counseling in the best interest of students, members should: educate students and families of their ethical responsibilities in the admission process, including counseling students that it is unethical to: i) submit false, plagiarized, or fraudulent statements on applications or other documents, ii) have more than one pending Early Decision application, iii) maintain an active enrollment deposit or the equivalent at more than one US college, iv) fail to notify colleges where they have decided to decline their offers of admission.”*

At this point, Mr. Kramer could send Elaine and her family a copy of the Early Decision agreement as a reminder of what the family agreed to when Elaine applied ED. At the same time, he could strongly encourage her to withdraw already submitted applications and not submit additional ones as she acknowledged in the agreement.

However, if Elaine and her family push forward, what other issues could impact Mr. Kramer? Here are some issues which might influence how Mr. Kramer moves forward:

- **Financial Aid.** Students may withdraw from Early Decision if their financial need is not met. Furthermore, the Early Decision agreement states students can wait to withdraw other applications for financial aid notifications. In a day and age when merit and need based aid often intertwine, there are many questions. For example, how do the scholarship offers (and promises) impact this process? Could those offers impact SU’s offers? What if Elaine had not applied for aid at Seinfeld U? What if the college has not awarded merit or need yet? If the college has notified her about aid, what if the family appealed (merit and or need based) and is waiting to hear?
- **School and district policy.** Many institutions have a policy to send one final transcript to the college where a student plans to enroll. Does Festivus School have policies regarding transcripts? What are those policies? Is there a set policy about sending transcripts after Early Decision? Is Early Decision included in the school’s current policy?
- **Laws about transcript ownership.** Essentially, based on state law and federal regulation, students have access to their transcripts even though individual institutions own them. Thus, even if the school has a policy, can Festivus School legally hold future transcripts if the student is in good standing and follows proper school process to request a transcript?
- **Student privacy.** If the student moves forward with other applications, Mr. Kramer might not be able to share the conflict with others (including the colleges) based on student privacy. This concern is also discussed in the Guide, I C I c), *“Members should not divulge an individual student’s college application status, admission, enrollment, or financial aid and scholarship offers without express permission from the student.”*
- **Integrity and reputation.** When he first signed the Common Application Early Decision Agreement/Approval, Mr. Kramer signed his name on behalf of his school supporting that “he had advised the student to abide by the early decision commitment.” At the time, he did so believing the student would withdraw other applications or not apply to future colleges. Now that the situation might be changing, can Mr. Kramer feel his signature is no longer valid? What could he do?

As is often the case with ethical issues, what started as a seemingly simple situation brings up a complex scenario requiring counselors to navigate the needs and expectations of students, their families, colleges, high schools, and themselves. Often these situations bring up more questions than answers. Exploring the questions will help Mr. Kramer navigate the situation.

For example, Mr. Kramer could plan to meet with Elaine and her family to better understand the financial concerns to see if she should appeal the aid offer and possibly withdraw from Early Decision. He could also meet with his school head or administration to discuss school policy, transcript issues, and the possible future applications. In addition, if the issues continue to develop, he might talk to the student, family, and administration about contacting Seinfeld University to withdraw his ED agreement signature.

Thank you to all of our readers for engaging with this year's Ethical Navigations. Whatever you celebrate, have a wonderful holiday season. Happy 2026!

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.