

February 2026 Ethical Navigation: On the Bench but Still in the Game

[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 Kathleen Voss, Regional Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Georgia Tech.

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](#) (GEPCA) 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:

Bill Blitz, Director of Admission at Gridiron University, is concerned. In his weekly leadership meeting, the Vice President of Enrollment is encouraging him to do something a bit different this year. Instead of deferring Early Action (EA) students into the regular round as they have done in the past, the VP thinks there is yardage to gain by sending a percentage of these students directly to the waitlist.

While Bill is familiar with and has relied on the waitlist in the past, bypassing the defer process feels a bit like a false start. Then again, Bill knows that many of these students, even if they are deferred, will be flagged for the waitlist neutral zone anyway. He hates to bench kids, but he is looking at Gridiron's long game and knows that this year's class probably won't reach the end zone until late June... or, July even!

Does he attempt the flea flicker and bypass defer, or will that result in a fumble? Bill Blitz wonders if his handy admission playbook, GEPCA, can provide any insight.

The Conundrum:

Many colleges traditionally used and relied upon the waitlist like an NFL team's practice squad or ability to sign a free agent-- to fill a space if an opening becomes available. However, some colleges now use the waitlist as an enrollment tool to build a balanced class, similar to how professional football teams have back-up players on the bench.

Historically, movement from the waitlist begins after May 1. But with record high application numbers, surges in geographic popularity, the looming demographic "cliff" and having to rely on the intentions of 18-year-old brains; colleges are finding each year harder to predict yield. In the long run, admission directors like Bill Blitz have to serve their institution, but they also want to treat students fairly.

Thus, Bill Blitz is considering the impact of waitlisting compared to deferring students. As he evaluates the option, he believes deferred students would need to receive a new decision by April 1. Waitlisted students might not hear anything until summer but could be admitted off the waitlist earlier. Thus, waitlisting a student might allow the university more time before re-reviewing the application, which would relieve some pressure on his team. However, this might leave students waiting for a reply longer. In addition, Bill Blitz is concerned that students, families, and counselors might be confused by a new decision at this time (historically, the university has admitted or deferred all EA applicants).

Furthermore, while this decision might seem minor, Bill Blitz feels each play is important. In this case, EA has become the Big Game for Gridiron as over half of their applicants come through that timeline. And while timing of decision and the impact on his staff are considerations, the university has traditionally approached Regular Decision and the waitlist differently. The timing of the waitlist has been similar to overtime in that everything is on the line to make the winning push to enroll a class. Thus, while Gridiron traditionally does not look at demonstrated interest, major choice, financial need, or other factors, those plays could come be implemented if they develop and use the waitlist.

While GEPCA does not enforce deadlines or restrict the use of a waitlist there are best practices to consider.

Possible Approach:

Article II The Responsible Practice of College Admission, Section B discusses Waitlists. This section reads, “B. Wait Lists *Wait lists help colleges manage their enrollments and give students who were not initially admitted another opportunity to be considered for admission. By placing a student on the wait list, a college does not initially offer or deny admission but extends to the candidate the possibility of admission should space become available. Timely offers of admission from the wait list serve both institutions and students.*”

The section continues, that, “1. *Recommended Practices for Implementation. Colleges should:*

- a. Include the historical range in numbers or percentages of students offered admission from the wait list and the availability of housing and financial aid with an initial wait list offer.*
- b. Not require a deposit or set a fee for remaining on a wait list.*
- c. Allow students who are offered admission from the waitlist after May 1 at least 48 hours before requiring a verbal or written commitment to enroll.*
- d. Notify students of their financial aid offer and availability of housing before requiring a commitment to enroll.*
- e. Notify all waitlist candidates of the final decision no later than August 1.”*

Using the information from GEPCA as guidance, Bill can suggest to his VP that applicants sent directly to the waitlist are clearly informed that this is a new approach in their process. In addition to informing students directly, communications about the change could be shared on Gridiron University’s website, social media channels, and in correspondence with high school counselors on the front lines so that they can counsel students accordingly.

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.