

January 2025 Ethical Navigation: An Icy Situation

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 Blake Brunner, Dean of College Counseling and Chair of the English Department at St. Margaret's School in Tappahannock, VA.

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:

It's January. All the teachers at Snowflake High School have submitted their grades for the first semester, the administrators have approved the grades and sent them to parents, and now it's time for the college counselor, Mr. Jack Frost, to fulfill the New Year's tradition that counselors everywhere are undertaking: sending midyear reports to colleges. These reports include updated transcripts, providing a snapshot of grades earned in the fall semester and a (likely) final glimpse into a senior's academic progress.

This year, just after Mr. Frost busily sent off reports to colleges, he receives unexpected news. Crystal Icelyn, one of his seniors, has decided to drop Honors Glacier Science—a notoriously challenging course—following a frosty disagreement with her teacher. Crystal's decision to drop the class occurred after the midyear report had already been sent. Now, Mr. Frost is faced with a dilemma: Should he notify the colleges of the change?

Possible approach:

NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* provides clarity for Mr. Frost as he navigates this dilemma. Article I A.1.b) states that members should “share information about students that is relevant to the college admission process as well as accurate, up-to-date, and free from misrepresentations of fact or material omissions at the time of submission.”

This guidance suggests that omitting Crystal's course change could constitute a material omission, particularly since course rigor is a significant factor in many admission decisions. Transparency is at the heart of ethical practice, but Mr. Frost must also consider equity and professionalism.

Would withholding this information give Crystal an unfair advantage? Conversely, would disclosing it disproportionately harm her prospects if her overall academic rigor remains strong?

To address the situation, Mr. Frost might consider the following steps:

1. Consult School Policy: Snowflake High School may already have policies in place regarding post-reporting changes to a student's course schedule. Mr. Frost should adhere to these policies and ensure students and families are aware of them upfront.
2. Communicate with Crystal: Mr. Frost could meet with Crystal and her family to explain the ethical importance of transparency in the admissions process and discuss the potential impact of notifying colleges. Specifically, Mr. Frost could point out that the Common Application asks students to agree to certain affirmations, the second of which reads, “I agree to notify

institutions to which I am applying immediately should there be any changes to the information requested in this application.” This conversation could also provide an opportunity for Crystal to share any extenuating circumstances that might have influenced her decision. It could also cause her to reconsider her decision and rejoin the class.

3. Partner with college admission officers: Mr. Frost or Crystal could reach out to college admission officers at schools where Crystal has applied to ask how potentially dropping a course might impact the admission process. This information might help Crystal determine her next steps.
4. Provide Context to Colleges: If Mr. Frost decides to inform colleges of the change, he should offer a clear and thoughtful explanation. For instance, he could outline Crystal’s continued academic strength in other challenging courses and detail any circumstances surrounding the decision to drop Honors Glacier Science. Depending on the college, this approach might help mitigate any potential negative impact on her application.
5. Collaborate with School Administrators: Mr. Frost could work with Snowflake High School’s leadership to establish or refine guidelines for reporting post-midyear changes. Mr. Frost might also want to ensure that the college guidance office is included in any discussions with seniors about potential class changes before they occur. If the counselor had been part of the initial discussion, Mr. Frost may have been able to provide relevant information to Crystal rather than trying to figure out how to address the issue after the fact. This collaboration would also ensure consistency and fairness in handling similar situations across future cases. Proactively communicating these policies to students and families would provide greater clarity and prevent unnecessary confusion.
6. Encourage Student Advocacy: Another option is to empower Crystal to take the lead in explaining her decision to colleges. Mr. Frost could guide her in crafting a professional, thoughtful communication that outlines the reasons behind her course change. This approach not only maintains transparency but also demonstrates Crystal’s maturity and ownership of her decisions, which are traits that colleges often value.

By embracing the principles of honesty, transparency, and equity, as outlined in the GEPCA, Mr. Frost can handle this delicate situation while preserving trust with all parties involved. He demonstrates professionalism by prioritizing ethical decision-making, even in challenging circumstances.

Ultimately, the decision to disclose the course change should be guided by what is in the best interest of both Crystal and the integrity of the admissions process. Ethical dilemmas like this remind us of the importance of balancing advocacy for students with our responsibility to uphold the principles of our profession. In the sometimes-icy world of college admissions, it is integrity that keeps us from slipping and sliding around.

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.