

January 2026 Ethical Navigation: New Year, New Pressures

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 Michael Nixon, Senior Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Maryland.

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:

John Q was recently admitted to Snowstorm U just before winter break. As the calendar turned to the new year, he received an email from Snowstorm alerting him to a limited scholarship available for students who confirm their enrollment by February 1st.

John was admitted to several other universities as well and is awaiting scholarship and financial aid packages. He was also hoping to use the spring to visit these schools so he could make an informed decision ahead of May 1st. While John is very interested in Snowstorm U, he is not sure that is where he wants to matriculate and is now feeling pressured to commit as the scholarship is very attractive.

Thus, John approached his counselor, Jack Frost, for advice. After discussing the situation, Mr. Frost is unsure of how to tell John to proceed. He understands John would like more information, but the scholarship could be a great opportunity. Mr. Frost wonders if GEPCA provides direction.

The Conundrum:

While many schools follow the suggested May 1st National Candidates Reply Date, there are outliers and some programs within institutions might not follow this date. Although GEPCA does not enforce deadlines, John's counselor would like to look at possible approaches to speak with Snowstorm U to allow John to make an informed decision, as his other schools have given him until May 1st to decide.

Possible Approach:

Article II of GEPCA states, *"Students benefit if they have an organized and developmentally appropriate schedule that allows for a reasonable amount of time to identify their college choices; submit applications for admission, financial aid and scholarships; and decide which offer of admission to accept. Members are encouraged to work with other campus offices such as academic departments, housing and financial aid to create a consistent deadline that does not require students to make a commitment or accept an offer prior to May 1."*

Specifically, Parts A and B state, *"National Candidates Reply Date: Colleges should use the widely recognized date of May 1 as the earliest enrollment confirmation deadline. Before being asked to make an enrollment decision and to commit to an institution, students should have time to hear from each school that admitted them and receive notice of i) Offers of financial aid and scholarships. ii) Admission to honors and other special programs. iii) Availability of housing. c) Members are encouraged to work with other campus offices such as academic departments, housing and financial aid to create a consistent deadline that does not require students to make a commitment or accept an offer prior to May 1. i) Binding Early Decision plans and recipients of athletic scholarships are recognized as exceptions to this recommendation. ii) Offers of admission should state if the deposit is refundable or non-refundable."*

Using these pieces as guidance, Mr. Frost could suggest that John contact the admissions office at Snowstorm University to ask for an extension or to inquire if the deposit is refundable until May 1. This information may allow John more flexibility. Additionally, Mr. Frost could reach out directly to Snowstorm University to clarify policy and express his concern.

Hopefully, through this conversation, Snowstorm U would provide John until May 1 to accept the scholarship and choose to enroll. However, what if the university holds firm to the original February 1 scholarship deadline and/or say any deposit would be non-refundable? What advice could Mr. Frost provide? Depending on the circumstance, Mr. Frost could advise John to explore different pathways:

- John could contact the other schools where he has been admitted. He could explain the situation and ask whether he could get his scholarship/aid packages.
- John could decide not to enroll at Snowstorm U in order to wait to see other packages/aid. This might be risky in the sense that John would not have this scholarship available, but necessary if John cannot or does not want to lose the deposit.
- If his family has the finances, John could deposit at Snowstorm U knowing that he might have to withdraw his enrollment commitment if he chooses a different school later in the year.

According to GEPAC 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 institution.”*

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.