

June 2026 Ethical Navigation: The Tides that Bind

[The Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling \(PCACAC\) Admission Practices Committee](#) is proud to present *Ethical Navigations (EN)*, an educational effort to explore issues that might face professionals involved in the college admissions process.

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:

When Summer Smith received her admission to Peir Point University last March, she was over the moon with happiness and excitement! After doing thoughtful research into a dozen different colleges, Peir Point University had become Summer's dream school for its hands-on approach to studying Marine Science, the ideal water-front location far from home, and the generous merit aid awarded to support her undergraduate studies.

"Life is Good!" became her mantra, representing a significant shift away from the anxiety and doubt that had clouded her perspective throughout the year. According to Mr. Shell, her college counselor at Back Bay High School, Summer's family situation was complicated by a painful divorce and the fact that her non-custodial parent had a "no contact" restraining order issued after they created an emotional tsunami by blaming Summer for the end of the marriage.

With her enrollment at Peir Point confirmed, Summer felt that she was turning the tide on her future and was clear with Mr. Shell that she did not want her college destination to be shared publicly. In fact, Summer had not opted to post her choice on the student-run, social media page a classmate developed.

One week before graduation, Mr. Shell learned that, in an effort to promote Back Bay High School's academically rigorous program, the administration had decided to publish a full-page ad in the local paper, the *High Tide Times*, including a photo of each graduate, their name, and their college choice.

This move represented a change for BBHS, who had not previously linked student names (or photos) with college destinations in any public advertising. When Mr. Shell approached the administration and raised concerns over student privacy, he was told that "in the ever-increasingly competitive nature of college admission, the school had decided to publish this ad to *celebrate their student's success.*"

The principal, Mr. Ebb, added, "What's the problem? We've had a phenomenal year in college admission, and I thought you would be on board with this decision." After checking school records, Mr. Ebb followed up with Mr. Shell, adding that, Summer Smith had not opted out of the school's publicity and privacy policy which was in the annual enrollment contract. Therefore, the school could celebrate her enrollment publicly.

The Conundrum:

Mr. Shell is all too aware of the potentially negative impact this type of college list advertising could have on his students, particularly Summer Smith. For many seniors, the admission process can feel less like a personal search for fit and more like a competition to gain admission to colleges with names that carry social value. With BBHS's decision to release this information to the wider community in the *High Tide Times*, Mr. Shell wonders whether this will open a floodgate of similar "celebrations"

for future students? Mr. Shell is worried about students' stress levels, and he anticipates that the added pressure might actually cause students to make important decisions based on selectivity and the perceived value of a college, rather than matching their authentic preferences to programs that fulfill their educational goals.

Possible Approach:

The Preamble of GEPCA states, “*College counseling and admission professionals help students make thoughtful choices about their futures. Our work is guided by principles of honesty, integrity, transparency, equity, and respect for students and fellow professionals. These values guide us in our service to students and families, our institutions, society and each other.*”

GEPCA offers additional clarifying guidance in this case. In Core Values: Professionalism, it states, “*We believe that ethical behavior is the foundation of the counseling, admission, and enrollment management profession. We are responsible for the integrity of our actions and, insofar as we can affect them, the actions of our member institutions, organizations, and individuals.*”

Most directly, GEPCA, Article I: C.1. addresses the confidentiality concerns with its statement, “*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.*”

With GEPCA in hand, Mr. Shell could approach his school’s administration and respectfully request that they either pull the ad from the local paper or redesign it to only include a list of college acceptances and matriculations, adding data regarding the diversity of student options and choices for college.

To help reshape the narrative and focus on the process over outcomes, Mr. Shell could also encourage his colleagues to consider and recognize the extraordinary effort students invested in essay writing, self-reflection, research, and balancing rigorous coursework with extracurricular commitments. With his professional experience in counseling hundreds of students through the process, Mr. Shell could offer to collaborate with students on an article highlighting the skills they developed while engaging with the college research and application journey.

Post Script:

When Mr. Shell sat with Summer Smith to explain the school’s plan for the advertisement in the local paper, he was proud of how well she handled the news. After several moments of reflection, she said, “Fine, the school can include my photo and my name. As for my college, they can list UNDECIDED!”

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.