

## March 2026 Ethical Navigation: Chasing a Pot of Gold

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[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.

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:***

As March arrives, Director Riley O'Connell at Clover Hill University is watching the deposit dashboard more closely than the weather forecast. While applications were strong, deposits are trending below projection. Senior leadership is growing concerned.

At a cabinet meeting, the president asks about options to increase yield before May 1. Ideas are floated quickly:

- Increase scholarship offers to high-achieving students who have not yet committed.
- Revisit students who declined admission and offer additional financial incentives.
- Add urgency to communications about limited housing and course availability.
- Reconsider earlier scholarship decisions for students still “on the fence.”

The president emphasizes the broader institutional impact of a small class: reduced course offerings, hiring freezes, and budget tightening across campus. Riley understands the institutional stakes.

At the same time, Riley wonders:

- Is it fair to increase awards for students who have not committed, especially, when others have already deposited without additional incentives?
- How transparent should the institution be about enrollment pressure?
- At what point does strategic recruitment become reactive decision making?
- How would a change impact colleagues across the desk supporting student decisions before May 1?

### ***The Conundrum:***

Riley feels caught between institutional sustainability and equitable practice.

On one hand, enrollment shortfalls have real consequences. A smaller class can impact staffing, program viability, and student services. Riley knows the president is acting out of concern for the long-term health of the university.

On the other hand, Riley worries about fairness and transparency. If additional scholarships are offered only to students who have not yet committed, does that disadvantage families who acted in good faith earlier? If urgency messaging implies scarcity that may not materialize, does that compromise trust?

Riley wants to support the institution while remaining aligned with ethical practice. Does NACAC's Guide provide any help?

**Possible Approach:**

Riley could begin by grounding the discussion in NACAC's Core Value of Trust, which states, "We believe our profession is built upon trust and honesty with one another and with students."

Furthermore, Section 1.A. of GEPCA discusses, **Truthfulness and Transparency: Guiding Principles and Rationale**, stating, "Members should provide comprehensive, truthful, and factual information that will allow all parties to make informed decisions."

More specifically, Article 1. A. 1 further elaborates that *Colleges should make publicly available comprehensive, accurate and current information concerning:*

- f) All deadlines including admission, scholarships, financial aid, and housing.*
- g) Factors considered in making admission, financial aid, and scholarship decisions.*

Thus, while yield is an integral conclusion to the admission process, Riley might want to consider any decisions carefully. Ideally, any strategies implemented should not compromise the long-term trust built between the institution, students, and school counselors.

In practice, this could guide Riley to consider:

- Are new scholarship offers being applied consistently under a defined policy framework?
- If financial aid reconsideration is available, is that process clearly communicated to all admitted students?
- Does urgency messaging accurately reflect institutional realities?
- Would the institution feel comfortable if these strategies were publicly shared?

Rather than making reactive, individual adjustments, Riley could recommend establishing transparent parameters for scholarship reconsideration. For example, the university might open a clearly defined appeal window for all admitted students, rather than selectively increasing awards.

Riley could also work with leadership to articulate the institutional context honestly, without creating artificial pressure. Informing students about housing timelines or enrollment deadlines is appropriate when accurate. Suggesting scarcity where it does not exist would conflict with the spirit of transparency.

Additionally, Riley might consult with financial aid colleagues and senior leadership to ensure any strategy aligns with institutional policy, state regulations, and established scholarship practices.

Ethical navigation in yield season often requires balancing competing goods: institutional sustainability and equitable treatment of students. The GEPCA provides our community a shared language to ensure that institutional goals remain student-centered.

March may bring talk of luck and pots of gold, but enrollment management is not built on luck. It is built on trust. As yield season unfolds, professionals could ask themselves: If our approach became public, would we stand confidently behind it?

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*If you have any questions feedback, or proposals for future Ethical Navigations, please contact [info@pcacac.org](mailto: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.*