

May 2025 Ethical Navigation: Hyped-up Waitlist

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 Emily Coffey, Co-Director of College Guidance at The Gunston School, and a PCACAC Admissions Practices Committee member.

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:

Jen Java, College Counselor at French Roast High School, breathed a sigh of relief as May 1 came and went, and all her students had their post-secondary plans figured out. As Jen reviewed materials to proctor AP exams, she received an email from her student, Lavender Latte, asking for advice.

On the afternoon of May 5th, Lavender received the following email from Coffee College:

Hello from Coffee College! In the coming days, we have the ability to move a handful of students from the waitlist into the Class of 2029. On our waitlist form, you indicated that Coffee College is your top choice school.

We know you may have changed your mind, so we are writing to gauge your continued interest.

We understand that cost influences college selection. Attached you will find the financial aid award package you can expect from Coffee College.

If, after considering your financial aid award and continued interest in Coffee College you can commit to accepting an offer of admission, we ask that you let us know via email by 11:59 pm Eastern time on Tuesday, May 6 and we can make it official.

Lavender meets with Jen Java to express her thoughts. She is excited about the email because Coffee College has been her first-choice college all along, but she also feels like everything is happening so quickly. Lavender needs to study for her upcoming AP exams, and now she has to weigh the pros and cons of attending Coffee College. She also feels flustered by the short timeline to make her decision. Yet, she is afraid to say anything because she wants Coffee College to offer one of their open spots to her.

Jen Java understands Lavender's combined excitement about the email and frustration about the timeline. Jen Java also has some concerns and frustrations regarding the email from Coffee College. Jen's concerns include:

- Coffee College hasn't actually admitted Lavender.
- Coffee College has not addressed room, board, or other possible concerns.
- Lavender received the email at 3:00pm on May 5th, and was asked to reply by 11:59pm on May 6th, which is a very short turnaround when making such an important and complicated decision.

The Conundrum:

Jen Java needs a jolt of inspiration to help her advise Lavender Latte, so she turns to NACAC's Guide to Ethical Practice in Admission.

Jen understands that Coffee College is trying to protect their yield percentage, but the tactic of gauging a student's interest and only officially admitting them from the waitlist if the student says they will commit to enrolling doesn't feel student-centered. Article 1 B. in GEPCA reminds Jen that the student's best interests should be at the center of our work, *"Advocating for students' best interest in the admission process is the primary ethical concern of our members."*

Furthermore, GEPCA has a section, Article II B, dedicated to discussing waitlists. Despite the questionable manner of gauging student interest, Jen Java appreciates that the college provided an estimated financial aid award package. GEPCA says in Article II, B. 1. d). that colleges should, *"Notify students of their financial aid offer and housing before requiring a commitment to enroll."* However, Coffee College has not addressed housing availability, which could be a significant concern for a student.

In addition, Jen Java finds it very disappointing that Coffee College gave Lavender such a short turnaround window. Article II, B. 1. c) of GEPCA states colleges should *"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."* Technically, Coffee College has not admitted Lavender yet, but Jen still thinks they should give her at least 48 hours to consider her reply.

Possible approach:

What could Jen consider doing to help support Lavender?

- Since Lavender is considering saying "yes" to Coffee College, Jen Java can help Lavender advocate for more information and time to make her decision. Jen knows Lavender is nervous to make such a request because the student thinks asking questions will signal to Coffee College that they might not be her top choice. While explaining best practices for a waitlist offer, Jen Java can advise Lavender to state her strong interest, but to ask for at least 48 hours to reply and for information about housing.
- If Lavender requests more time, Jen Java, in the spirit of the GEPCA core value of collaboration, could consider calling the admission office at Coffee College to also advocate for Lavender. Jen could also allude to the importance of keeping a student's best interest at heart, as outlined in GEPCA, and express her concerns about the policy not seeming to be student centered.
- Jen can help Lavender analyze the financial aid offer to make sure the Latte family understands the financial obligation they might make. Jen should consider reaching out to Lavender's parents to see if they have any questions, and to offer any advice or explanation they may need.

Jen Java knows and respects the pressures her admission colleagues must be facing as they work to ensure they have a fully enrolled class. At the same time, Jen is trying to manage AP exams, junior students who want to talk about their college process, and seniors with bad cases of senioritis. What Jen really wants is a break and a cappuccino! Hopefully through honest communication between Jen, Lavender, the Latte family, and Coffee College, Lavender can be granted time to make her decision.

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.