October 2026 Ethical Navigation: *Shining* a Light on a Possible *Nightmare*

The Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling (PCACAC) Admission Practices Committee is proud to present *Ethical Navigations (EN)*. 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:
Having recently returned to her campus from her first NACAC conference in Minneapolis after changing careers, counselor Clarice Starling returns to her school on Elm Street. She is feeling rejuvenated and ready to tackle the workload before the biggest deadline of the year, essentially *Halloween* as November 1 is on a Sunday. However, as she settles behind her desk, Clarice has a recurring feeling that makes her want to *Scream!*

One of her students, Michael Moyer, enters her office for a quick check-in. From previous meetings and student surveys, Ms. Starling knows Michael completed a culinary class with teacher Hannibal Lecter and made a movie with his friend Freddy Kreuger. But Michael never provided any specific details about these endeavors.

In hopes of adding some depth to her recommendation, Ms. Starling asks Michael some questions about senior year and what activities he is reporting on the Common App. However, Michael stoically masks his answers with vagueness and then cuts off the conversation, saying he is late to class. Not wanting him to miss class, Clarice tells him to, *"Get out!"*

Not to be deterred, Ms. Starling continues to investigate, saying she will follow up with an e-mail asking about his activities, which she does later that day. She also innocently asks if he would share a preview of his activities section of the Common App.

Michael ends up replying late that night, near midnight, mentioning he is thinking about playing hockey as his friend, Jason Vorhees, has extra equipment. He also writes that his activity section is fully complete because he knows colleges feel, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

The next morning, as she reads the e-mail in her office, Clarice thinks she is in a nightmare because she still does not know what activities Michael actually does and cannot determine what he might be reporting to colleges on his application.

The Conundrum:
At this point, Clarice Starling believes Michael might be misrepresenting himself on the Common App. She is also concerned about what she can write in the School Report and Counselor Recommendation as her school asks counselors to provide a holistic overview of the student.

Ms. Starling believes that college admission officers- based on GEPCA's core values of Collegiality, Collaboration, and Trust- often look to available counselor and/or teacher recommendations as an opportunity to provide context and verify information. Colleges also believe counselors and teachers should speak strictly to what they have firsthand knowledge of or what the high school feels comfortable officially attesting to.

Thus, feeling the weight of her responsibility, she wants to best represent the student while also providing accurate information which she can verify. What ethical responsibilities does she have? Can she turn to NACAC's Guide to Ethical Practice in College (GEPCA) for advice?

Possible Approach:
Importantly, GEPCA is written for professionals in the process, not students. According to Article 1.B.1.b. i) *"To provide college admission counseling in the best interest of students, members should educate students and families of their ethical responsibilities in the admission process, including counseling students that it is unethical to submit false, plagiarized, or fraudulent statements on applications or other documents."*

Thus, Ms. Starling could work to educate Michael Moyer about his responsibility to accurately represent himself on the application. Examples of that work might include:

- Pointing out the GEPCA guideline she is following
- Going over Common App's application affirmations that students agree to before submitting their application. One of these specifically discusses honesty and accuracy. She could share this information with Michael and his parents.
- Consider developing a school policy where all students sign off on a form based on the Common App affirmations.

However, even when a counselor works to educate their students, the student applies to colleges directly, and the counselor has no guarantee of what the student submitted. Yet, the counselor is often asked to complete a Secondary School Report and Counselor Recommendation. In this case, at her school, Clarice is asked to write a summative overview. In this situation, Article 1. A. b) guides, *"Members should share information about students that is relevant to the college admission process as well as accurate, up-to-date, and free from misrepresentation of fact or material omissions at the time of submission."*

Given Michael is being evasive about his activities, Clarice Starling could approach the faculty moderators/advisors of Michael's activities to better understand Michael's involvement. She could also write to Michael (with a copy to his parents) requesting a clear description of his activities while explaining this information will best help her advocate for him through the counselor letter.

If those efforts do not provide more clarity, she could follow several approaches:

- She could write the recommendation while providing minimal details about activities.
- She could approach her school administration to explain the problem with writing a holistic letter. She could suggest and request advice which might include:
    - Writing a summative overview focusing only on academic context.
    - Not writing a recommendation for Michael. On the Common App school form, there is a checkbox where she could complete the form and then check that she is not providing a counselor recommendation.
    - Asking an administrator if they are willing to write the recommendation. If Clarice decides to approach this solution, she could check with college admission officers to confirm that they will accept a letter from an administrator in lieu of the counselor.

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.