

A diverse group of professionals, including a woman with glasses and a man in a suit, are smiling and looking towards the camera. They are seated around a table in a meeting room, with other people visible in the background. The image is overlaid with a blue geometric shape that frames the text.

**NACAC**

National Association for  
College Admission Counseling

# **GUIDE TO ETHICAL PRACTICE IN COLLEGE ADMISSION**

## Preamble

Promoting ethical admission practices has been the cornerstone of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) since our founding in 1937. NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* supports both students and institutions by promoting best practices in college admission. NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* serves as the basis of our profession and an affirmation of what we believe.

Since its inception, compliance with the *Statement of Principles of Good Practice* and, later, the *Code of Ethics and Professional Practices* was a condition of NACAC membership, and all members were expected to comply with the statements in the document. In 2017 the United States Department of Justice identified elements of the statement that they considered to be anti-competitive and in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. As a result, the 2020 Assembly approved the new *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* as a statement of recommendations that the Assembly believes best promotes ethical and best practices in college admission.

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.

Our profession strives to ensure that the students we serve, and all our colleagues are valued and supported. We thrive by embracing and engaging our unique identities, experiences and perspectives, and we are committed to increasing the enrollment and success of historically underrepresented populations. We are dedicated to promoting college access and addressing systemic inequities to ensure that college campuses reflect our society's many cultures, stimulate the exchange of ideas, value differences, and prepare our students to become global citizens and leaders.

NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission* is the conscience of our profession. It can guide our actions in the face of current and emerging pressures. It empowers us to build trust and find common ground while we work to ensure that every student's dignity, worth, and potential are realized in the transition to postsecondary education. While this guide is intended to state what NACAC members believe are the best, ethical practices for conducting the admission process, we believe they are applicable to all admission professionals.

---

## Core Values

### Education

We believe in and are committed to educating students, their families, the public, fellow education professionals, and ourselves about the transition to and within postsecondary education.

### Access and Equity

We believe we should strive to increase access and eliminate from the education system bias based on race, ethnicity, religion or creed, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, political affiliation, national origin, or disability. We view this as fundamental to our responsibility as educators.

### Professionalism

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.

### Collegiality

We believe members should conduct dialogue with openness to differences, listening to various perspectives from a place of support and understanding. Members should strive to disagree without being abusive or demeaning.

### Collaboration

We believe the effectiveness of our profession—college counseling, admission, and enrollment management—is enhanced when we work together to advocate for students and their best interests.

### Trust

We believe our profession is based upon trust, , and honesty with one another and with students.

### Social Responsibility

We believe we have a duty to create a society that is free from racial and other biases for our colleagues and the students we serve.

---

## Section I. The Ethical Core of College Admission

### A. Truthfulness and Transparency: Guiding Principles and Rationale

*Members should provide comprehensive, truthful, and factual information that will allow all parties to make informed decisions.*

#### Recommended Practices for Implementation

- Members should:
  - Accurately describe, represent, and promote their schools, institutions, organizations, and services to students and to colleagues and should not [misrepresent](#) themselves or their institutions.
  - Share information about students that is relevant to the college admission process as well as accurate, up-to-date, and free from misrepresentations of fact or material omissions.
  - Ensure that alumni/ae representatives and interviewers, third party agents, vendors and other representatives [working on their behalf](#) follow the ethical best practices of the profession.
  - When publishing translations, ensure that the translation fully and accurately reflects the meaning of the text in the original language.
- Colleges should make publicly available comprehensive, accurate, and current information concerning:
  - All deadlines including admission, scholarships, financial aid, and housing.
  - Factors considered in making admission, financial aid, and scholarship decisions.
  - Academic majors and other academic offerings and programs, such as honors programs and off-campus study.
  - Institutional housing policies including availability, guarantees, requirements and costs for the first and subsequent years.
  - [Costs of attendance](#) and types of scholarships and other financial aid.
  - Significant changes to institutional policies and procedures due to pandemics, severe weather, or other extraordinary circumstances.
- Secondary schools should provide accurate, legible, and comprehensive transcripts and other school documents for all candidates for admission or scholarships. Secondary schools should:
  - Ensure that the data reported on [school profiles](#) and other documents is accurate and current.
  - Be transparent about when the [data](#) was gathered and the groups that are included or excluded from the [data](#).
  - Describe on their school's transcripts or school profile

- Grading scale or any other method of representing student progress.
- Grade distribution.
- Policies on weighting courses.
- Policies on repeated courses.
- Policies on reporting and calculating GPA.
- [Policies for reporting disciplinary infractions](#)<sup>1</sup>

## B. Professional Conduct: Guiding Principles and Rationale

*Advocating for students’ best interest in the admission process is the primary ethical concern of our members. This requires that students receive college admission counseling they can trust. Conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived, and unprofessional conduct undermine that trust. NACAC member institutions, organizations, and agencies should work together in an environment that fosters that trust.*

### Recommended Practices for Implementation

- To provide college admission counseling in the best interest of students, members should:
  - Provide guidance and information to help students determine their [best academic, personal, and financial college match](#).
  - 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.
    - Have [more than one pending](#) Early Decision application.
    - Maintain an active enrollment deposit or the equivalent at more than one US college.
    - Fail to notify colleges where they have decided to decline their offers of admission.
- To [avoid conflict of interest and the appearance of unethical behavior](#), members should:
  - Not be compensated by [commissions, bonuses, or other incentive payments](#), based on the number of students referred, recruited, admitted, or enrolled.
  - Not offer or accept [any reward or remuneration](#) to influence an admission, housing, scholarship, financial aid, or enrollment decision.
- To maintain a culture of collaboration and collegiality, members should not disseminate inaccurate, misleading or disparaging information about other secondary schools, colleges, organizations, or individual professionals.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also: <https://sites.ed.gov/underservedyouth/files/2017/01/MS6-Beyond-The-Box-Resource-Guide.pdf>, <https://www.aacrao.org/signature-initiatives/trending-topics/criminal-history-and-college-admissions>

## C. Confidentiality: Guiding Principles and Rationale

*The college admission and counseling community depends on trust. An important component in building this trust is maintaining confidentiality.*

### Recommended Practices for Implementation

Members should:

- Send and receive information about candidates in confidence and [protect the confidentiality](#) of all information that is shared.<sup>2</sup>
- Adhere to their institution's policies for confidentiality.
- Not divulge an individual student's college application status, admission, enrollment, or financial aid and scholarship offers without express permission from the student.
- Not ask candidates, their counselors, their schools, or others to divulge or rank order their college preferences on applications or other documents.

---

<sup>2</sup> See also: <https://www.nacacnet.org/professional-development/elearning/college-admission-ethics-in-action/>, <https://www.nacacnet.org/knowledge-center/professional-standards/compliance-center/european-union-general-data-protection-regulation-guidance/>

---

## Section II. The Responsible Practice of College Admission

### A. Admission Cycle Dates, Deadlines and Procedures for First-Time Fall Entry Undergraduates

*NACAC members believe that college choices should be informed, well-considered, and free from coercion. We believe that admission practices should be student-centered and should not be designed to manipulate students into applying to or enrolling at a college or university before they are ready.*

*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.*

#### Recommended dates and deadlines

- Application Deadline: October 15 should be the earliest application deadline colleges set for first-year candidates applying for fall admission.
- 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
  - [offers of financial aid and scholarships.](#)
  - admission to honors and other special programs.
  - availability of housing.
- 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.
  - Binding Early Decision plans and recipients of athletic scholarships are recognized exceptions to this recommendation.
  - Offers of admission should state if the deposit is refundable or non-refundable.
- Notification of admission: Member colleges should notify first-year candidates of their fall admission no earlier than after the official completion of their junior year of secondary school or its equivalent.



- [Notification of scholarship and financial aid offers](#): Students should not be required to submit an enrollment confirmation until the institution has notified them of all offers of financial aid and scholarships.
- Wait list notification: August 1 should be the final date for notifying all candidates remaining on the wait list of the final decision regarding fall admission to the institution.

## B. Wait Lists

*Wait lists help colleges manage their enrollments and give students who were not initially admitted another opportunity to be considered for admission. By placing a student on the wait list, a college does not initially offer or deny admission but extends to the candidate the possibility of admission should space become available. Timely offers of admission from the wait list serve both institutions and students.*

### Recommended Practices for Implementation

Colleges should:

- Include the historical range in [numbers or percentages of students offered admission](#) from the wait list and the availability of housing and financial aid with an initial wait list offer.
- Not require a deposit or set a fee for remaining on a wait list.
- 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.
- Notify students of their [financial aid offer](#) and availability of housing before requiring a commitment to enroll.
- Notify all wait list candidates of the final decision no later than August 1.

## C. Transfer Admission

*[Transfer admission](#) is complex in ways that make it impractical to suggest common dates and deadlines. To ensure an equitable and transparent process, transfer candidates should not be asked to make a commitment to enroll until they are able to review all relevant information including financial aid awards and estimates of how credits earned at previous institutions will transfer and apply toward a degree at the receiving institution.*

### Recommended Practices for Implementation

Colleges should:

- State their deadlines for applying for transfer admission, financial aid, scholarships, and housing.
- Make good faith efforts to be flexible in enforcing commitment deadlines.
- Be transparent in publishing their admission requirements for transfer candidates, including restrictions or limitations regarding specific majors or programs.
- Publish up-to-date lists of the institutions with which they have [articulated transfer agreements](#), including which courses and credits transfer and the minimum course grade that is acceptable for transfer.



- Before requiring an enrollment confirmation, colleges should:
  - Provide an evaluation of their prior college-level credits that is a good faith estimate of how those credits will be applied toward their degree requirements.
  - Provide a [financial aid offer](#) when applicable

## D. International Admission

*Institutions outside of the United States employ a variety of application procedures, testing policies and academic calendars: it is important to understand and acknowledge the differences when recommending best practices for NACAC members at institutions outside of the United States. Members outside of the United States should, however, strive to maintain a student-centered admission process that demonstrates a commitment to the Core Values that NACAC members have agreed should be central to the college admission process.*

### Recommended Practices for Implementation

Colleges outside of the United States should:

- Make publicly available accurate, comprehensive, and current information concerning:
  - Admission deadlines, including application and enrollment confirmation deadlines.
  - Admission criteria, including required specialized admission tests.
  - Academic courses/ programs.
  - Availability and types of financial assistance.
  - Availability and types of institutional housing.
- Ensure that all translations of admission materials accurately represent the content of the original language.

Secondary members outside of the United States should:

- Provide accurate, legible, and comprehensive transcripts and other school documents.
- Ensure that the data reported on school profiles and other documents is accurate and current.
- Ensure that, when providing translations, they accurately represent the content of the original language.
- Be transparent about when the data was gathered and the groups that are included or excluded from the data.
- Describe on their school's transcripts or school profile
  - Grading scale or any other method of representing student progress.
  - Grade distribution.
  - Policies on weighting courses.
  - Policies on repeated courses.
  - Policy on reporting and calculating GPA.
  - Policy for reporting disciplinary infractions.

## Use of Agents for Recruiting International Students

*NACAC member institutions who are enrolling students from outside of the United States should work to ensure that their recruitment practices are consistent, transparent, and serve the best interests of the students. Institutions may choose to use commissioned agents for recruiting students residing outside of the United States who are ineligible for US federal financial aid.*

*It is understood that, in some countries, students and families rely on agents, acting on behalf of postsecondary institutions, for college counseling services. Institutions both inside and outside the United States may utilize the services of these agents and compensate them based on the number of students enrolling or some other similar metric. NACAC members believe that if institutions choose to contract third-party agents to recruit on their behalf, the institutions should hold these agents to the same ethical standards as they do their staff members.*

## Recommendations for Implementation

Colleges employing agents should:

- Disclose that they have employed agents to recruit on their behalf.
- Ensure that commissioned agents are accountable for employing ethical business practices.
- Respond quickly and decisively when responding to reports of misconduct of the agents representing them.

---

## Section III. Application Plans, Definitions of Procedures, and Glossary

*NACAC members believe it benefits members and the students they serve when there is clarity and consistency to a process that can be complicated and confusing. To help clarify the process, members are encouraged to use the following definitions for application plans and other admission terms.*

### A. Application Plans

#### Non-restrictive application plans

Colleges allow students filing applications using one of these non-restrictive plans to submit applications to multiple institutions. It is recommended that colleges allow students who are offered enrollment using one of these plans until at least May 1 to confirm their intent to enroll. Colleges should disclose whether admission to their institution or to any of their programs or majors or selection for scholarships is on a first-come, first-served basis.

- **Early Action (EA):** Students apply by an earlier deadline to receive a decision in advance of the college's Regular Decision notification date.
- **Regular Decision (RD):** Students submit their applications by a specified deadline and are notified of a decision within a clearly stated period of time.
- **Rolling Admission (RA):** Students apply at any time after a college begins accepting applications until a final closing date, which may be as late as after the start of the term for which they are applying. Students are notified of a decision as their applications are completed and are reviewed.

#### Restrictive application plans

Colleges utilizing one of these plans restrict the applications that students can file with other institutions.

- **Early Decision (ED):** Students commit to a first-choice college at the time of application and, if admitted, agree to enroll and withdraw their other college applications. Colleges may offer ED I or II with different deadlines. Students may be required to accept a college's offer of admission and submit a deposit prior to May 1.

Colleges using an Early Decision application should:

- Not make Early Decision the only application option for admission.
- Notify candidates of the admission decision within a clearly stated period of time.
- Respond to an application for financial aid at or near the time of an offer of admission and before a deposit is required.
- Release applicants from the Early Decision agreement if the candidate is

- Denied admission.
  - Deferred to an admission date other than that stated on the original application.
  - Offered a program or major that is different from that stated on the original application.
- State any admission preferences for specific applicant populations, such as legacies (typically siblings or the offspring of alumni/ae) or recruited athletes.
- State if admission preferences are available only to Early Decision candidates.
- **Restrictive/Single Choice Early Action (REA):** Students apply to a college of preference and receive an admission decision in advance of the Regular Decision notification date. Colleges place certain restrictions on applying under other early application plans.
  - Students admitted under Restrictive Early Action should be allowed until May 1 to accept the college’s offer of admission or to submit a deposit.
  - Colleges with Restrictive/Single Choice Early Action should not restrict students from applying under other colleges’ Regular or Rolling application plans.
  - Colleges should clearly articulate their restrictions in their Restrictive/Single Choice Early Action policies and agreements with students.

## B. Definitions and Glossary

**Admission counselors:** Admission counselors are professionals employed by or representing colleges. Their work may include some or all the following: advising students about the transition to college; informing students about undergraduate admission requirements, programs, and other offerings and opportunities; reviewing and taking action on applications for admission or scholarships. [Admission offices](#) may also be referred to as enrollment management offices and admission professionals may be referred to as enrollment managers or admission officers.

**Applications:** [Applications](#) are the medium or tool used by a student to apply to college. Colleges may use their own institution-specific application form; forms that allow students to apply to multiple colleges; or a combination of the two. Some types of applications are directed at specific student populations and may be identified as priority applications, international student applications, visual or performing arts applications, etc.

**Candidates for admission:** Students are considered candidates for admission until they have withdrawn their applications, officially confirmed their intention to enroll (usually by submitting an enrollment deposit), declined their offer of admission, been denied admission, or have had their offer of admission canceled.

**Colleges:** Colleges are two-year or four-year postsecondary institutions that enroll undergraduates and grant degrees. *NACAC’s Guide to Ethical Admission Practice in College Admission* follows common usage in the United States where “college” refers to any postsecondary institution that is either a college or a university.

**Commissioned agents:** [Commissioned agents](#) are individuals or other third-party recruiters, sometimes working within a company or agency, who are contracted and paid by colleges on a per capita basis to

recruit students. Agents compensated in this manner may not recruit students who are eligible for financial aid under Title IV of the United States Department of Education.

**Conflict of interest:** A situation that has the potential to [undermine the impartiality](#) of a person because of a clash between the person's self-interest and professional interest or public interests. [Conflicts of interest in admission and counseling](#) may often be prohibited by employers, by professional organizations, by government regulations, and by accreditation agencies.

**Cost of Attendance (COA):** As defined by the United States' Department of Education, it is an estimate of the total costs to attend an institution. Most institutions calculate the cost of attendance for one year. The estimate includes tuition and fees; room and board or living expenses for those not living on campus; books, supplies, transportation and other miscellaneous costs. When applicable the cost of attendance may include child-care; costs related to a disability and reasonable costs for eligible study abroad programs.

**Counselors:** Counselors are professionals who advise or counsel students about making the transition from secondary school to college or about transferring from one college to another. The term typically refers to secondary school counselors, independent educational consultants, counselors associated with community-based organizations, and transfer advisers at two-year and four-year colleges.

**Credit evaluation:** The receiving college's review and evaluation of a transfer student's prior academic record is called credit evaluation. The process is used to determine which prior college courses and credits will be applicable to the degree requirements at the receiving institution. The evaluation will include all coursework completed at postsecondary institutions as well as any credits earned through Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Cambridge, and College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exam scores.

**Deadlines and time zones:** When colleges specify deadlines for applications, deposits, or other commitments, the deadlines should refer to the postmarked date if responses are sent by ground/ air delivery. If they are sent electronically, colleges should specify whether the deadline's time zone is the sender's or the time zone of the college.

**Deferred enrollment:** Sometimes known as deferred admission, when the student is enrolling for a term that is later than the one for which the student originally applied for admission. There are two kinds of deferred enrollment:

- Student-requested deferral (commonly referred to as Gap Year): Colleges grant these requests at their discretion and set an enrollment deposit deadline that should not be earlier than the deposit deadline for the term for which the student originally applied for admission. Colleges should clearly state their deferred enrollment policies and may prohibit deferred students from taking college-level classes elsewhere before they enroll.
- College-initiated deferral: The college defers the student, declining to offer admission for the term for which the student applied, but offering admission or "guaranteed transfer admission" for a later term. Colleges may require students to complete college-level credits elsewhere before enrollment. Colleges should allow students to choose whether to earn these credits as degree-seeking or non-degree-seeking students.

**Deposits:** Enrollment deposits are the fees or written commitments that confirm a [student's intention](#) to enroll. They may also be referred to as tuition deposits or enrollment fees. Housing deposits are the fees that colleges require to hold a student's place in on-campus housing.

**Expected family contribution (EFC):** As used in the United States is [defined](#) as the amount that students and families should be able to contribute to the cost of the student's education as determined by the United States' Department of Education after the family submits the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

**Federal work-study (FWS):** As used in the United States is defined as a [program](#) that provides Federally subsidized part-time employment, usually on campus, to help cover the cost of attendance.

**First-year students:** Students who apply as [first-time undergraduate](#) matriculants are known as first-year students. These students typically have no previous college experience since graduating from high school.

**Guaranteed transfer program:** In the United States, the term is used in two ways:

- Statewide programs that ensure that community college students who earn an Associates degree will be automatically eligible to transfer to four-year institutions
- Programs where a college declines to admit an applicant as a first-year student, but guarantees admission as a transfer student for a subsequent term so long as the candidate completes college-level courses elsewhere and meets certain other requirements (see [Deferred Admission](#))

**Independent educational consultants:** Independent educational consultants or counselors are [professionals](#) working on a fee for service basis who provide services exclusively to students and families in the college selection and application process.<sup>3</sup>

**Legacies:** Legacies are applicants who have a relative (usually a parent or sibling) who is either a current student at the college or a graduate.

**NACAC members:** Members are individuals, institutions, groups, or organizations who have joined NACAC.

**Nontraditional undergraduate students:** Nontraditional students are individuals who do not fall within the profile of a dependent student aged 18–24. Nontraditional students may include those who do not attend college immediately after secondary school or who return after a prolonged absence, parents of dependent children, and those who are married.

**Offers of admission:** Official offers of admission may be transmitted by mail, electronically, or on official websites.

**Priority application:** Priority application is an application created for specific populations of students applying for general admission; specific programs or majors or scholarships.

---

<sup>3</sup> See also <https://hecaonline.org/>

**Priority deadline:** A priority deadline is an application deadline that colleges may establish for programs and majors that have limited space. The deadline may also be used for students who want to be considered for specific scholarships.

**Secondary schools:** The [schools](#) that students typically attend before they begin college. They may be public or private/independent and offer general, technical, vocational, and/or college preparatory coursework. The term may also include statewide agencies or private organizations that certify home-schooled students.

**Student athletes:** During the admission process, student athletes are students recruited by United States' colleges to participate in varsity athletics.

**Transcript:** A [transcript](#) is an official academic record that features a student's course of study at an institution. Information usually includes courses taken, a progress rubric, and other indicators of a student's academic development and achievement.

**Transfer Students:** [Transfer students](#) have typically earned or attempted college-level course credits after graduating from secondary school and are applying as matriculants from one undergraduate institution to another. The definition of a transfer student is determined by the receiving institution and may be based on the number of credits earned or attempted at the student's previous institution(s).