

Core Values as Our Compass

Shortly after the 2010 midterm election, Ami Fields-Meyer, a too-young-to-vote, self-described liberal from Milken Community High School in Los Angeles, found solace in his fellow citizens. Writing in the November 4 *Huffington Post*, he observed, “A steady capacity for change, in all its ambiguity and disappointing two-sidedness, is a remarkable achievement.” While Ami’s words pertained specifically to the elasticity of the American electorate, they also provide an astonishingly mature insight into the nature of change itself: change is neutral. What is not neutral is our perception of change and the impact it can have on an individual or community. A single innovation within a community—or, in our case, a profession—can elicit completely opposite reactions from members who, in good faith, are all working toward the same goal.

If this assumption is true—if one person’s solution has the potential to be another person’s problem—then how do we determine whose interests prevail? As members of NACAC, we look to the Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP) for guidance, but even this is problematic. The SPGP, for all the guidance and protections it affords, is, at fifteen pages, an unwieldy document. Its multiple sections—each of which serves an important purpose—can be intimidating and confusing to colleagues who do not interact with it regularly. However, the individual practices are the proverbial trees within an otherwise elegant forest. For all the focus we give at various times of year to specific issues, the overarching themes of the SPGP rest on our association’s six Core Values: Professionalism, Education, Fairness and Equity, Social Responsibility, Collaboration, and Trust.

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If we agree that these principles provide the scaffolding that supports our work, then these must also be the principles by which we assess whether or not a particular innovation, change or shift is congruent with our shared mission of “help[ing] all students realize their full educational potential, with particular emphasis on the transition to postsecondary education.”

Our goal in drafting this article is twofold. First, we aim to suggest a practical and objective framework for evaluating difficult issues that is based on our Core Values. Our professional debates can—and should—be passionate affairs, but they must also be reasoned

exchanges grounded in shared beliefs if we are to arrive at consensus that benefits each other and the students we serve. Sometimes this will mean questioning or revising long and dearly-held assumptions. Other times it will mean affirming these assumptions. The final resolution is important and so is the path we take to get there. Second, we seek to reinforce that these clearly-defined Core Values are precisely what allow our profession to evolve in a thoughtful, deliberative manner.

Our profession has a continuing history of important decision points. What follows is a discussion of three controversial issues from the profession’s past and present as seen through the lens of the Core Values.

Need-Blind vs. Need-Sensitive

From the standpoint of the SPGP, the need-blind vs. need-sensitive debate is settled law: colleges and universities should admit students without regard to financial need, but are not mandated to do so. This relatively simple statement, however, belies the contradictory opinions that infused three years of debate on this topic—debate that persists to this day.

How one feels about the role financial need should play in the committee room depends largely on how one interprets our core value of Fairness and Equity. Defenders of need-blind practices find nothing fair in admission decisions that hinge on a student’s ability to pay. They argue that students deserve an admission decision based on

their merits, not their finances, and that denying these students admission denies them the opportunity to try to make the finances work. Alternatively, supporters of need-sensitive admission believe the practice is more just than admitting students only to provide them with woefully inadequate aid packages. Proponents of need-sensitive admission could also make the argument that the practice spares especially needy students from excessive indebtedness, thus upholding the core value of Social Responsibility.

For most of the association’s history, the SPGP mandated that colleges and universities adhere to a need-blind admission policy.

However, by the early 1990s, a handful of postsecondary members admitted to employing need-sensitive admission practices. In response to this revelation, the 1993 NACAC Assembly commissioned a “confidential survey of the membership, both secondary and post-secondary, on need-blind practices, beliefs and feelings.” The survey found that 10 percent of postsecondary respondents practiced some form of need-sensitive admission. As a result of the survey, the 1994 NACAC Assembly passed a resolution that both affirmed the association’s commitment to need-blind admission and placed a one-year moratorium on sanctions so the issue could be explored further. The conversation that followed resulted in the acceptance—if not the embrace—of need-sensitive admission as a necessary fiscal reality for many institutions.

Independent Counselors

During the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, different parts of the country began to see the rise of a new profession—independent counseling. These counselors, for a fee, provided families with extra help to enhance the college admission advising that students received from their school-based counselors, or they provided all the advising when there were no other resources.

As is often the case with anything new, this practice was met with wide range of skepticism. On the high school side, many counselors were offended by the idea that students needed additional help in the college process. They saw independent counselors as providing advice that supplanted or contradicted their own, leading to students’ confusion. Further, many saw it as a completely unnecessary proprietary expense for advice that was free at school.

On the college and university side, there was also skepticism. Some of the new counselors were advancing their businesses by telling potential clients that they had an “in” with certain colleges that would provide an advantage in the admission process. Others feared that these counselors would act as agents for colleges, funneling students to those schools for some type of considerations.

The truth was more complex. Many high schools, especially those that were not members of NACAC, did not have student-to-counselor ratios that allowed for the same level of college counseling available to their more fortunate peers. As a result, students with inadequate or nonexistent college counseling programs sought the services of independent counselors to receive what was not available in their schools. Over time, colleges and universities found most independent counselors to be ethical professionals who provided excellent services to their students and actively

tried to match students with the best possible college choices. For these students, independent counselors reinforced the Core Values of Education and Fairness and Equity.

This evolution of opinions about independent counselors was mirrored in NACAC’s treatment of them. Originally prohibited from joining the association, independent counselors were welcomed into the membership beginning in 1984. What changed? Certainly time played a factor, as colleagues became accustomed to the idea of counselors who were paid for their services. More important was the realization that bringing independent counselors into the membership would reinforce another Core Value—Professionalism—by ensuring that all individuals engaged in college counseling activities are operating under a single set of principles.

May 1 – The Candidate’s Reply Date

If you were able to have individual conversations with many admission and guidance personnel, there would be almost universal agreement that, while the entire SPGP is important, May 1 is the document’s cornerstone. In a sense, May 1 represents Fairness and Equity at its purest. At the same time, it is May 1 that prompts the majority of complaints to the National Admission Practices Committee. Most of the allegations come from one of two root causes.

The first cause is ignorance of the principle. Deans and directors who are new to the profession, housing officers, financial aid directors, athletic coaches, trustees—all influence the enrollment process, but they do not necessarily understand the principles to which we subscribe. Whether they come from other “industries” or from within the academy, they sometimes make policy decisions that come into direct violation of the May 1 deadline. Viewed through the lens of institutional interests, their motivations are understandable. What is absent from these decisions is a regard for Trust and Collaboration. Our profession, in large part, relies on trust in each other and on the ideal that we are working together in the best interest of young people as they make informed decisions about their future free of unwarranted coercion.

Colleges that try to gain an institutional advantage by imposing earlier deadlines violate that trust. Students often do not know about their rights in the process, and if they do not have access to an informed advisor, they may feel that they must make that earlier commitment. In essence, schools that disregard the national reply date gain a short-term institutional advantage by taking advantage of ill-informed students. Fortunately, when violations such as these arise from ignorance, institutions are quick to come into compliance

when they are notified of the concern. Such conversations, while not always comfortable, reinforce yet another of our Core Values: Education about our professional standards.

The second root cause is more difficult to deal with, because it is created by individual institutional demands and needs. Admission offices and academic departments do not want to leave money on the table, so they desire to know as early as possible whether or not a student will accept a scholarship. Housing officials with limited beds need to be assured that there will be enough for everyone—but not too many. Academic deans in programs, such as nursing or physical therapy, are confronted with enrollment caps imposed by external accreditors and thus feel pressured to hit their targets exactly. In each of these examples, as well as many others our colleagues face each year, May 1 can seem a hindrance rather than a help.

We understand that the needs of every institutional member are different, and the pressures and demands on enrollment professionals are significant regardless of those needs. However, whether those demands are enrolling enough students to meet the institutional payroll, decreasing the discount rate to meet board expectations, or limiting the overall incoming class in the face of increasing popularity, there are ways to deal with these pressures that do not violate our core values of Professionalism, Fairness and Equity, Collaboration, and Trust. These other solutions may not be as easy as establishing a deadline that violates our May 1 principle, but they are worth the additional work and time to uphold our professionalism, to promote fairness among students and each other, to reinforce our strong sense of collaboration, and to maintain the trust of our students and our colleagues. In support of these values, the National and Affiliate Admission Practices Committees are always happy to work with colleagues to find those other, better ways of meeting institutional demands.

As an association, we cannot legislate against every possible problematic practice. NACAC members are continually seeking new strategies for meeting educational and institutional goals, and we cannot anticipate what changes might come. Further, as our history proves, some innovations that initially appear controversial ultimately evolve into accepted practices and behaviors. Regardless of the issue, the Statement of Principles of Good Practice—and specifically the Core Values it espouses—serves as a template for evaluating our policies and practices. The SPGP is a living document that adapts to changes in the ways that students are recruited, counseled and enrolled. When new ideas lead to a change in our professional practices, it is the SPGP that helps us

determine how to respond. By comparing innovations against the principles set forth by NACAC and voluntarily agreed upon by all members, we can determine if new practices are ethical and can continue, if they are unethical and should be ended or if the SPGP should be modified to reflect an evolution in membership thinking.

At its best, the SPGP is a balance of the philosophical and the prescriptive, of general principles and specific rules. Members who criticize individual mandates as unnecessarily legislative often lose sight of the larger picture. Returning to May 1: try to imagine our profession without a national candidates' reply date. Colleges could demand a deposit from students at any time. Institutions able to get their decisions out first would have the greatest advantage, exacerbating the arms race. Application deadlines would move earlier and earlier, perhaps into the junior or sophomore year, forcing students into commitments well before their thoughts about college could fully develop. What stops this metaphorical Wild West is not the rule that establishes May 1 as a candidates' reply date. Rather, it is the overarching agreement that such a scenario flatly contradicts both the Core Values of our profession and our own best interests.

At the heart of each issue described in this article—as well as many thorny issues our profession debates—is the most important and problematic core value: Trust. Often, each opposing side can legitimately say to the other, “Trust us to make decisions that are in the best interests of students.” It is at that point when the other Core Values must serve as our compass as we wrestle with how to reconcile our differences and move forward in service to our colleagues, our institutions and our students.



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