



# Turning the Tide II

**How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Distress in The College Admissions Process**

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## Executive Summary

In January of 2016, Making Caring Common released *Turning the Tide*, a set of recommendations endorsed by over 50 college admissions deans, that sought via college admissions to elevate ethical character, especially concern for others and the common good, to increase access and equity for economically disadvantaged students, and to reduce excessive, damaging achievement pressure in many communities. This report argued that what's important in college admissions is not the quantity of students' achievements or long "brag sheets" but the quality of their ethical and academic engagement. In the first comprehensive effort of its kind, a large group of colleges publicly and collectively sent a message that they seek applicants who care about others and their communities and who are energized by meaningful learning.

In this follow-up report, we focus on the critical role of high schools and parents in supporting teens in developing core ethical capacities, including a sense of responsibility for others and their communities, and reducing achievement-related stress. Parents and high schools also powerfully shape the admissions process.

But an intense focus on academic achievement has squeezed out serious attention to ethical character both in a large majority of high schools and a large number of families (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). Many parents—particularly, middle- and upper-income parents—seeking coveted spots for their

children in elite colleges are failing to focus on what really matters in this process. In an effort to give their kids everything, these parents often end up robbing them of what counts. Despite persuasive research suggesting that certain cognitive, social, and ethical capacities—including the ability to take multiple perspectives, empathy, self-awareness, gratitude, curiosity and a sense of responsibility for one's communities—are at the heart of both doing good and doing well in college and beyond (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Felton, 2016; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Syvertsen, Metzger, & Wray-Lake, 2013; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017), many parents pay little attention to cultivating these capacities in their children in general and specifically during the admissions process. Many parents also fail to be ethical role models during the admissions process by allowing teens to mislead on applications, letting their own voice intrude in application essays, hiring expensive tutors and coaches without any sense of equity or

“In an effort to give their kids everything, these parents often end up robbing them of what counts.”

fairness, treating their teen's peers simply as competitors for college spots, and failing to nurture in their teen any sense of gratitude for the privilege of attending a four-year college. College admissions may well be a test for parents, but it's not a test of status or even achievement—it's a test of character.

Alert to the wishes of parents in their communities, high schools in middle- and upper-class communities often follow parents' lead. Many of these schools are too focused on highly selective colleges, don't adequately nurture students' interests and curiosity, and do little to challenge parents engaging in ethically troubling behavior.

But, as we have found over the past three years, there are many paths to progress. Since the launch of our first *Turning the Tide* report, many colleges have stepped up to make substantial changes to their admissions processes in line with the report's recommendations (see Appendix A). We also release here the Dean's Commitment Letter (see p. 30), a pioneering statement endorsed by almost 140 college admissions deans that seeks to give high schools greater freedom in advancing these goals and to allay parents' fears of short-changing their child if they don't amass impressive achievements. Many high schools are also taking key steps that advance *Turning the Tide's* goals. We report here on our new campaign (see p. 28) that has engaged 189 high schools and middle schools nationwide in promoting these goals and that more broadly supports high schools in developing students' ethical character.

In addition, we offer actionable guideposts for parents and high schools for shaping an admissions process that advances *Turning the Tide's* goals and that suggest a role for parents and schools that puts young people's ethical character and well-being at the center of a healthier, more sane college admissions process. In the coming months, we will be publishing resources to support parents and high schools in the implementation of these guideposts.

## Ethical Parenting in the College Admissions Process<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Keep the focus on your teen.** The college admissions process is a key rite of passage in adolescence and can be a wonderful opportunity for parents to get to know their teen in a deeper way. It's also an important opportunity for parents to model the empathy in their relationship with their teen that is key to their teen's relationships. But it's critical for parents to disentangle their own wishes from their teen's wishes and avoid conflating their interests with their teen's interests. Throughout the process, parents should get input from their teen about whether their involvement in the process is helpful. Often it's important for parents to just pause and listen.
- 2. Follow your ethical GPS.** The college admissions process often tests both parents' and teens' ethical character. While a handful

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<sup>1</sup> These guideposts are an abbreviated version of the guideposts for parents starting on p. 13.

of parents engage in outright unethical practices to give their child an edge in admissions, many more parents may slip into more subtle forms of dishonesty—allowing their own thinking or voice to intrude in college essays, for example, or looking the other way when hired tutors are over-involved in applications. Rather than dismissing misrepresentations as trivial or finding ways to overlook them, we as parents ought to be willing to ask ourselves hard, fundamental questions about who we want to be and what we want to model for our children. Is getting into a particular college really more important than compromising our teen’s or our own integrity?

“...we as parents ought to be willing to ask ourselves hard, fundamental questions about who we want to be and what we want to model for our children.”

- 3. Use the admissions process as an opportunity for ethical education.** The college admissions process can be a powerful introduction to the values of adult society, and young people can be deeply

troubled by what they experience. Many students are keenly aware that the deck is stacked, that there are vast differences in access to resources in the admissions process, and that college is unaffordable for staggering numbers of families. Many also struggle with how much they can embellish their applications and “play the game” without compromising their own authenticity and integrity. Parents should take up these ethical questions and concerns with their teens— they offer a powerful opportunity for an ethical education—and explore with their teens how to address the unfairness in the process.

- 4. Be authentic.** Many parents fail to have authentic, honest conversations with their teens during the college admissions process and send conflicting messages (“I want you to go to the college where you’ll be happiest” and “I want you to go to the best college you can get into.”) These mixed messages can diminish parents’ role as trusted guides and erode their capacity to support their teen in expressing themselves authentically. Many parents need to reckon with these conflicting feelings and talk to others both about these feelings and about how to discuss them authentically with their teen. Parents also can try to understand the many school and community factors that may be influencing their teen’s college considerations so that they can

talk to their teens in ways that acknowledge these realities.

**5. Help your teen contribute to others in meaningful ways.**

What makes service valuable is not whether it involves a trip to a new country or launching a new project. They're also not what matters to admissions deans. What makes service meaningful and what matters to the deans is whether service is chosen based on authentic interest, and is immersive, meaningful and sustained. Parents can explore with their teen the kinds of community service or ongoing contributions that are likely to be meaningful, discuss why one does service, and check in with their teen about their service experience. What is their teen learning? Are they finding their work gratifying? Do they feel helpful? Why or why not? What kinds of challenges are they facing and how might these challenges be overcome?

**6. Advocate for elevating ethical character and reducing achievement-related distress.**

Many colleges and high schools are unlikely to change practices that emphasize achievement and sideline ethical engagement unless parents start “walking the talk” and become strong advocates for promoting ethical character and reducing stress. Parents need to step up—respectfully but firmly—to advance a very different vision of high schools and the college

admissions process. They can press for prioritizing not just academic achievement but ethical character, take a zero-tolerance stance on achievement-related distress, and advocate for greater equity and fairness.

**7. Model and encourage gratitude.**

The college admissions process offers many opportunities for parents to model and cultivate gratitude in their teens. Any teen or parent of a teen who is applying to a four-year college that has a strong track record of graduating students should feel grateful for this tremendous opportunity—an opportunity that a great majority of people in the world simply don't have and an opportunity that a staggering number of people in this country can't afford. In addition, teens should be expected to appreciate the many educators, counselors, and adults—including their parents—who shepherded them to this point. Parents can ask their teen who they've appreciated in this process and why, and encourage their teen to consider people who may not be on their radar—a teacher, a friend, or a community adult who helped in a quiet, subtle way.

## Ethical College Admissions: A Guide for High Schools<sup>2</sup>

- 1. Set ethical expectations with families.** Most parents are constructive and responsible in their college admissions-related interactions with schools. But many parents, including those who genuinely want their child's school to promote ethical character, neither model ethical character nor support schools in promoting it in the college admissions process. To establish what it means for parents to be a member of a caring, ethical community, schools can create a "compact" or agreement with parents, an active document that should be referred to throughout the year, that spells out the school's and parents' obligations in promoting ethical character, leveling the playing field for economically disadvantaged students, and reducing achievement-related distress in college admissions.<sup>3</sup>
- 2. Create opportunities for authentic student service and contributions to others.** High school students in some communities are caught up in a kind of community service Olympics, a contest to see who can get an edge in their applications by tackling the most formidable problem, often in a distant country. But what is most important to the colleges

endorsing *Turning the Tide* and the Deans Commitment Letter is whether an experience is immersive, sustained, chosen based on authentic interest, and provides students opportunities for reflection with both peers and adults. High school counselors and teachers can explore with students the kinds of community service or contributions that are likely to be meaningful and seek to provide students with a wide range of service experiences and other ways to contribute to their communities, such as working to prevent students from being bullied or isolated in their own school.

- 3. Use the admissions process as an opportunity for ethical education.** Like parents, high schools should explore with teens the many ethical questions that the admissions process raises, such as why the admissions process often advantages certain students such as athletes and children of donors, why large inequities in the process exist and what can be done to remedy them, why well-intentioned people participate in unfair systems and how to both express oneself authentically and "play the game," making oneself attractive to colleges. High schools, like parents, might also ask their teen to imagine what a fair, equitable admissions system would be and consider with teens what needs to change for this system to exist. High schools might utilize a variety of scenarios and role plays

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<sup>2</sup> These guideposts are an abbreviated version of the guideposts for high schools starting on p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> A sample compact from Making Caring Common is forthcoming.



with students to explore these questions.

- 4. Focus students on daily acts of character and provide evidence of character in applications.** Schools have a crucial responsibility to promote cultures and relationships that cultivate concern for others and other key ethical capacities in students, and the endorsers of *Turning the Tide* underscore that a student's daily conduct "is critically important" in admissions. At a minimum, schools might provide guidelines to school counselors and teachers that both help them assess the capacities that comprise ethical character and that guide them in describing these capacities in recommendations. Schools might also develop deeper and more comprehensive ways of capturing these capacities by, for example, using assessments that draw on the input of students' peers, teachers and other adults.<sup>4</sup>
- 5. Guide students in reporting their substantial family contributions and challenges.** Many teens are unable to engage in community service or activities outside the home because they spend substantial time supporting their families—such as working to

provide family income or supervising a younger sibling—and these ongoing responsibilities may be far more likely than community service to promote key ethical and emotional capacities such as compassion, selflessness, perseverance, and respect. Schools should guide teens in reporting not just community service and contributions but these responsibilities.

- 6. Focus students on a wide range of colleges.** At the core of excessive achievement pressure in middle- and upper-class communities is one fundamental myth: Only a small number of highly selective colleges will position students for success. Students who are convinced that these colleges are the key to success will continue to be hounded by fears of disappointing or shaming their parents and themselves until they and their parents embrace the reality that their chances are very high of being accepted at one of a wide ranges of colleges that are just as likely to lead to success (Challenge Success, 2018). High schools can reduce the focus on a small number of highly selective colleges by presenting facts about job satisfaction and general well-being reported by students who attended colleges of varying selectivity; exposing students to colleges that vary in selectivity and to alternative pathways to careers; encouraging parents and students to avoid commercial college rankings; focusing on

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<sup>4</sup> Over the last two years, Making Caring Common has piloted an assessment in several high schools that relies in part on anonymous peer assessments to identify students who are caring, fair, and helpful, including helpful to students who are marginalized or struggling. Learn more about this effort at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/research-initiatives/character-assessment-college-admissions>.

meaningful outcomes (such as student satisfaction) rather than selectivity when communicating to parents and prospective students about the colleges attended by graduates; and launching an awareness campaign with neighboring schools elevating a wide range of colleges and alternative pathways to careers.

- 7. Create limits on advanced courses and discourage students from overloading on extracurricular activities.** Schools need to have comprehensive and mission-driven conversations about what is a healthy and balanced academic load for their students. Educators might consider creating clear guidelines that prevent students from overloading on high level (AP/IB/Advanced) courses each year. As part of this effort, schools should intentionally survey students, faculty, and parents on an ongoing basis to assess homework loads, pace of life and student well-being and engagement. Based on the results schools should establish appropriate limits that reduce stress and lead to more meaningful engagement in courses and activities and adapt these limits as needed.

“At the core of excessive achievement pressure in middle- and upper-class communities is one fundamental myth: Only a small number of highly selective colleges will position students for success.”

## Introduction

In January of 2016, Making Caring Common released *Turning the Tide*, a set of recommendations endorsed by over 50 college admissions deans, that sought via college admissions to elevate ethical character, especially concern for others and the common good, to increase access and equity for economically disadvantaged students, and to reduce excessive, damaging achievement pressure in many communities. This report argued that what's important in college admissions is not the quantity of students' achievements or long "brag sheets" but the quality of their ethical and academic engagement. In the first comprehensive effort of its kind, a large group of colleges publicly and collectively sent a message that they seek applicants who care about others and their communities and who are energized by meaningful learning.

Since then, the trends in our country that sparked *Turning the Tide* have only become more troubling. Incivility is rampant and bigotry is emboldened (Barrouquere, 2018; Kishi, 2017). Americans are increasingly and bitterly divided along political lines and cynical about democracy (Doherty, 2017; Laloggia, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2014). As colleges become increasingly unaffordable (Maldonado, 2018), the climb for economically disadvantaged students to and through college is even steeper, and achievement pressure in many communities remains fierce and debilitating.

This report briefly describes the promising work that we at Making Caring Common, in collaboration with college admissions offices and many others, have undertaken since the release of *Turning the Tide* to address these problems, as well as some of the roadblocks we've faced (see Appendix A). But we primarily focus on the critical role of parents and high schools in advancing *Turning the Tide's* goals. While it is essential that colleges take steps to reform the admissions process, high schools and parents have the largest impact on whether teens develop core ethical capacities, including a sense of responsibility for their communities, and suffer achievement-related stress. Parents and high schools also powerfully shape the admissions process.

Yet an intense focus on academic achievement has squeezed out serious attention to ethical character both in a large majority of high schools and a large number of families (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). The admissions process itself can corrode the development of core aspects of young people's ethical character, fueling their self-interest, compromising their integrity, and depleting their capacity to either know themselves deeply or to authentically articulate their identity in a college application. Many young people become cynical both about a system that seems unfair and divorced from their interests and about the adults who created it.

Too often, middle- and upper-class parents are also corrupting the process for their teens and focusing on the wrong

things. Research suggests that certain cognitive, social, and ethical capacities—including the ability to take multiple perspectives, empathy, self-awareness, gratitude, and a sense of responsibility for one’s communities—are at the heart of both doing good and doing well in college and beyond (Durlak et al., 2011; Felton, 2016; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Syvertsen, Metzger, & Wray-Lake, 2013; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Yet parents often pay little attention to cultivating these vital capacities. Many parents also focus on colleges’ selectivity and get too caught up in test scores and grades, rather than focusing on cultivating in their children the interests and curiosity that lead to meaningful academic engagement. Yet a good deal of research shows that what chiefly matters for both college and work satisfaction and success is not how selective a college is but a student’s level of engagement while they’re there (Challenge Success, 2018). Many parents in middle- and upper-class communities are also failing as ethical role models and guides in this process. They’re allowing teens to mislead on applications, letting their own voice intrude in application essays, hiring expensive tutors and coaches without any sense of equity or fairness, treating their teen’s peers simply as competitors for coveted college spots, and failing to nurture in their teen any sense of gratitude for the privilege of attending a four-year college. Alert to the wishes of parents in their communities, high schools in middle- and upper-class communities often follow parents’ lead. Many of these high schools are too focused on highly selective colleges, don’t adequately nurture students’

interests and curiosity, and do little to challenge parents engaging in ethically troubling behavior.

At the same time, as we’ve found over the past three years, there are many paths to progress. Since the launch of our first *Turning the Tide* report in 2016, many colleges have stepped up to make substantial changes to their admissions processes in line with the report’s recommendations. We also release here the Dean’s Commitment Letter, a pioneering statement endorsed by almost 140 college admissions deans that seeks to give high schools greater freedom in advancing these goals and to allay parents’ fears of short-changing their child if they don’t amass impressive achievements. This letter commits these colleges to honoring high schools’ curriculum. That means that no student will be disadvantaged in applying to these colleges if their high school, for example, limits advanced coursework—a commitment that is key to reducing excessive achievement pressure. Nor will students be disfavored if a school is only able to offer a few advanced courses and extracurricular activities—a commitment that is key to strengthening the prospects of economically disadvantaged students. Many high schools are also taking key steps that advance *Turning the Tide’s* goals. We report here on our new campaign that has engaged 189 high schools and middle schools in the U.S. in promoting these goals and that more broadly supports high schools in developing students’ ethical character.

In addition, we offer actionable guideposts for high schools and parents

for shaping an admissions process that advances *Turning the Tide's* goals.

At bottom, this report assumes that the college admissions process is a complex ecosystem involving many stakeholders—including parents, students, college admissions officers, college boards of trustees, high school teachers, administrators, counselors, athletic coaches, donors, alumni, and consultants—and that aligned and concerted efforts are important. But this report also assumes that these various stakeholders need to take independent action, often beyond their comfort zones.

We have heard from educators and parents, for example, who seem to be calibrating how much they should focus on teens' ethical character based on how much it's valued in college admissions. But that misses the point: Parents and high schools have a fundamental responsibility to cultivate teens' ethical character that shouldn't depend on whether it's valued in college admissions. Nor can parents and high schools simply blame college admissions offices for tying children in knots about achievement—they need to act independently to reduce this stress. For their part, college admissions offices

## OUR WORK AHEAD

This is the first of three reports seeking to advance *Turning the Tide's* goals, and in the coming months we will provide additional resources to support parents and high schools in implementing this report's recommendations. Our next report takes up how we can fundamentally change and improve how students select colleges. Economically disadvantaged students in particular often lack critical information that could guide them in their college decisions, while large numbers of students—especially financially better-off students—select colleges based on commercial ranking systems that prey on their insecurities and status concerns while providing scant or misleading information about where they are likely to fit and flourish. Improving the college prospects of economically disadvantaged students and curbing excessive achievement pressure mean providing information to students that is useful and powerful enough to loosen the grip of harmful commercial rankings and to constructively influence students' college choices. In this next report, we take up new technologies and systems that are providing students with accessible, engaging, and more constructive information that could revolutionize how students select colleges.

We report specifically on our work assisting and advising Google in a project to provide far better, more compelling information to students and their families. Our third report will focus on new, more effective and equitable ways of assessing and selecting applicants in the college admissions process. Far too often, current assessment systems send the wrong messages about what students should value and fail to capture key ethical, social, and emotional strengths that are strongly predictive of college and career success. Assessment systems also often fail to identify the impressive determination, resilience, and aptitude of students—often economically disadvantaged students—who have family responsibilities such as working to provide family income or supervising younger siblings, yet still manage to stay afloat in school. Some colleges, encouragingly, are now seeking to improve their assessment and selection systems. Yet almost all colleges can do substantial work to improve these systems—work that is crucial given the high stakes of these assessments for both applicants and colleges.

have ethical responsibilities that shouldn't depend on parents and high schools. Colleges, for example, ought to withhold information from misleading and pernicious ranking systems and refuse to incorporate these flawed indices in their institutional marketing efforts, regardless of whether parents are highly focused on rankings. Parents, as we take up in this report, need to stop pointing fingers at each other. We can't wait for each other to act. We all need to do more and to do better.

Two major caveats are in order. First, because *Turning the Tide* focused on selective colleges and has been led primarily by admissions deans from these colleges, this report mainly discusses the largely middle- and upper-class students applying to these colleges. This focus is certainly not to suggest that the problems of equity and access for economically disadvantaged and marginalized students are less important. In fact, there's no question that the biggest problem in college admissions is that huge numbers of young people, especially low-income and first-generation students, struggle to access or simply can't afford college or land in colleges that aren't committed to their success. Almost two-thirds of Americans aged 25 years and older don't hold a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Our next two reports will move beyond our original focus and deal substantially with this challenge.

The second, related caveat is that, while this report focuses on students attending four-year colleges and it's vital to increase the number of young people accessing these colleges, it's also vital

to expand and bolster innovative, exciting initiatives cropping up across the country that create alternative pathways to the workforce. Many of these alternative pathways, to be sure, are now barebones and provide narrow and modest learning experiences. But constructed thoughtfully, these pathways are not only considerably less expensive than traditional colleges, but can provide equally strong, if not stronger, educational experiences. These pathways can also cultivate ethical character via service and other types of ethical engagement and learning.

This report proceeds as follows. We first offer guideposts for parents for developing an admissions process that advances *Turning the Tide's* goals. Next, we offer guideposts for high schools for guiding teens through an admissions process that cultivates ethical character. We then turn to our campaign to advance these goals in middle and high schools nationwide, followed by an explanation of the Dean's Commitment Letter and how we hope high schools and parents will utilize it. Finally, we share brief thoughts about moving forward.

## Methodology

The recommendations and guideposts in this report are based on dozens of structured interviews with students and parents and hundreds of more informal conversations with students, parents, counselors, and educators over the last 12 years as well as on two nationwide surveys we conducted and a review of related research.



In Spring 2016, we offered an optional college admissions-related survey to schools in our network. We asked questions about college admissions-related stress, what factors are most and least valued in college admission decisions, and students' approaches to and views about the college admission process. Two thousand, one hundred and ninety-three (2,193) 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students took our survey representing 16 schools. Although we did not collect data on students' parents' income, we suspect, based on our sample of schools, that students from these schools tend to be more affluent than high school students generally. Our sample is slightly female (53%). Survey takers were mostly White (54%) and Latinx (23%). Black and Asian-American students each represented fewer than 10% of survey takers.

In 2014, Making Caring Common conducted a survey of approximately 10,000 middle and high schools students, which was developed to learn more about students' values and their perceptions of others' values, as well as about traditional domains of school climate such as physical and emotional safety, social support, and school connectedness. These students were economically, racially and culturally diverse and represented a wide range of regions of the country.

## Ethical Parenting in the College Admissions Process

Parents and other primary caregivers<sup>5</sup> shape their children's moral development in myriad ways (Berkowitz, 1998; Cowell & Decety, 2015; Lickona, 2004; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). They also often influence every phase of the college preparation, search, and admissions process.

Yet the troubling reality is that a great many parents are fundamentally failing to prepare young people to be caring, ethical community members and citizens. That's true in part because of the degree to which parents have elevated achievement and demoted concern for others as the primary goal of child-raising. According to Making Caring Common surveys as well as other research, a majority of parents report prioritizing their children's care for others over their achievements (Bowman, Hunter, Dill, & Juelfs-Swanson, 2012; Weissbourd, 2015). But in our 2014 survey of about 10,000 middle and high school across the country, youth were far more likely to view parents as prioritizing achievement over caring (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). They were also three times more likely to agree than disagree with this statement: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I am a caring community member in class and school." In another survey we conducted of high school students in a wealthy independent school, almost half of students said that it was more important to their parents

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<sup>5</sup> When referring to "parents" throughout this report, our intention is to include parents and other primary caregivers who are raising children.

that they get into a good college than that they were good people. When we reported this data to teachers at this school, a few protested vehemently that this percent was too *low*. “The kids are lying to you. All these parents care about is their kids getting into a good college.”

And making matters more complicated, rather than searching inward for the source of achievement pressure, parents often blame another culprit—other parents. While parents tend to rank caring over achievement as a priority in their own child-raising, parents are about three times more likely to view other parents in their community as prioritizing achievement over caring. It seems that a great majority of parents think the problem is other parents.

In the following seven guideposts, we explore specifically how parents can guide their teen ethically, reduce excessive achievement pressure, and promote key ethical, social, and emotional capacities in teens in the college admissions process.

## 1. Keep the focus on your teen

**Why?** The college admissions process, a key rite of passage in adolescence, can be a wonderful opportunity for parents to get to know their teen in a deeper way—to understand what they are drawn to, hope for, fret about, and value in others and themselves. It is also a vital opportunity for parents to express and model the empathy in their relationship with their teen that supports their teen’s

### HOW PARENTS CULTIVATE ETHICAL CHARACTER

Parents constantly shape children’s moral development. Children’s moral development is highly dependent, for example, on whether parents and other primary caregivers model appreciation of others day to day, on how parents define their own and their child’s circles of concern and obligation, on whether parents have high expectations about their children acting fairly and attending to others—including those who are different from them—and on whether children practice caring for others, for example, by regularly pitching in to help their families and communities. Parents promote their children’s concern for others when they’re able to “zoom in,” carefully tuning in to and appreciating their children’s feelings, and “zoom out,” engaging older children especially in larger questions of justice in their communities and society. Further, moral and emotional development are deeply interwoven, and parents powerfully influence children’s emotional development (Weissbourd, 2009). Parents are constantly shaping whether children develop positive emotions such as gratitude that increase children’s appreciation of others or are swamped by negative emotions such as shame, envy, and entitlement that corrode this appreciation. Parents also clearly influence how much harmful achievement pressure children experience by, among other things, the schools and neighborhoods they choose, how they define achievement, and whether they explicitly or tacitly approach achievement in ways that stir up in their children anxieties about disappointing them.

authenticity and is so crucial for teens to develop in their relationships.

Yet our hopes, anxieties, and needs in this process can cause us to misunderstand or subordinate our teen's needs. We may, for example, tacitly pressure our teen to attend a college to live out our dreams, compensate for our shortcomings, or reproduce our own college experience. When parents compete with other parents or view their teen's college choice as a public marker of their success as parents, they can both sideline their teens' needs and flood their teen with fears of shaming them if their college options don't broadcast success. A high school student told interviewers at the Education Conservancy that the most helpful change that parents and colleges could make in the admissions process is to send the message that "you're a perfectly good person—maybe even a better person—if you don't go to one of the top ten colleges."

During the college admissions process, parents also face their teen's impending separation from them. The admissions process is often a rite of passage for teens *and* for parents, a time when parents' role and center of gravity shifts in ways that can shake loose feelings that can undermine parents' ability to act in their teens' best interests. Some parents may cling to their teens more tightly than they should, anxiously asserting what remains of their control of their teens' life and hampering their teens' ability to think independently—the infamous "helicopter," "bulldozer," or "lawnmower" parents. Other parents, eager for their teen to move on, may prematurely back away.

**How?** It's important for parents to undertake the often subtle, difficult work of disentangling their wishes from their teen's wishes. Because we all have our blind spots, parents can often benefit a great deal from talking to those they respect and trust about the places where their own and their child's views about colleges conflict, and about how to handle these conflicts.

Parents, too, can be alert to moments when they may be conflating their interests with their teen's. It should be a red flag for us as parents if we find ourselves peppering admissions staff on college tours while our teen stands idly by, constantly assessing what our teen's course and activity choices mean for their college applications, find ourselves consumed with poring over commercial college rankings, or feel our self-esteem plummet if a child is rejected at a particular college.

At the outset of the process, parents might ask their teen questions that enable them to better engage in the complex choreography of following and guiding their teen. In the whipped-up, frenzied atmosphere of the college admissions process, parents often need to pause and listen. We might ask our teens whether they feel stress in this process and what is causing it. We might ask whether the process is causing them to compromise their values or making them feel less like themselves, and we might invite feedback on our role: "What role would you like me to play in this process?" "Will you tell me if I'm involved in ways that are making this process harder for you?"

## 2. Follow your ethical GPS

**Why?** The college admissions process often tests both parents' and teens' ethical character. A small fraction of parents engage in outright unethical practices to give their children advantages: getting psychiatrists to falsely diagnose their teen as having learning differences so their child is granted more time on standardized tests, threatening to sue guidance counselors who write poor recommendations, buying college essays online, or writing anonymous letters to admissions offices that seek to sabotage the admissions chances of other students at their teen's school. Far more commonly, parents may slip into more subtle forms of dishonesty—allowing their own thinking or voice to intrude in college essays, for example, or looking the other way when hired tutors are over-involved in applications, a trend that appears to be growing (Jaschik, 2017). There's good reason to believe that many teens lie or at least exaggerate on their college applications, and parents may also either condone or half-consciously overlook these violations. According to several studies, a whopping 80 - 95% of high school students report some form of cheating in the last year, and many of these students view cheating as trivial or don't see it as a problem at all (Challenge Success, 2012; O'Rourke, Barnes, Deaton, Fulks, Ryan & Rettinger, 2010; Wangaard & Stephens, 2011). In a survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (2012), 57% of high-schoolers agreed that, "in the real world, successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating." Some parents also give their

children advantages without any consideration of equity or fairness in the college admissions process, such as paying private college counselors \$40,000 a year (Berfield & Tergesen, 2007)—practices that also constantly fuel other parents' anxiety that they are short-changing their own child. Some parents discourage their teen from sharing information and resources with their peers, fearing that their teens might end up competing with those peers for the same colleges.

There are many compelling reasons why parents shouldn't let adults' thinking and voices seep into college applications or allow teens to misrepresent themselves in other ways. Allowing these misrepresentations sends the message that ethical standards can be ignored if they're inconvenient and that success doesn't need to be earned. Adolescence is also a time when teens are both developing strong moral convictions and high ideals and are prone to deep cynicism. They can be razor-sharp alert to hypocrisy and often long for adults who are North Stars, who they can deeply respect and trust (Coles, 1986; Erikson, 1968). When parents allow teens to misrepresent themselves, and especially when parents actively participate in that misrepresentation, they can stoke that cynicism and erode that trust. "I know kids," says Denise Pope from Challenge Success at Stanford University, "who are absolutely mortified when their parents cheat the system. They're embarrassed and ashamed" (Miller, 2013). Letting teens misrepresent themselves can also send the message to teens that there is something wrong with them: Why else, teens might ask themselves, would my

parents write my essay or allow me to misrepresent myself? (Miller, 2013). Misrepresentations can be self-defeating in another sense: They can land teens in the wrong college. When parents or teens try to justify misrepresentations by claiming that “everyone is doing it” or “the system is corrupt,” they also create a very slippery ethical slope that can simply reinforce teens’ conformist tendencies and deprive them of a key lesson in moral leadership— that morality often means going against the herd.

**How?** Rather than dismissing misrepresentations as trivial or finding ways to overlook them, we as parents ought to be willing to ask ourselves hard, fundamental questions about who we want to be and what we want to model for our children. We can consider whether getting into a particular college is really more important than compromising our teen’s or our own integrity. We can consider with our teens the exceptional cases when dishonesty is warranted in the service of a higher principle—when it means, for example, protecting someone’s life or advancing a vital cause—and discuss whether misrepresenting oneself to get into a college one prefers really qualifies as one of these cases. We can remind ourselves and talk to teens about why authenticity and honesty are critical—especially in this era of “fake news”—and about the necessity of acting in ways that we want to be precedents for others. Just as important, we can explore with teens why they might feel pressured to cheat or misrepresent themselves—do they fear disappointing or shaming themselves or us?—and think through

with teens what role we might play in alleviating that pressure.

### **3. Use the admissions process as an opportunity for ethical education**

**Why?** Far too often, the college admissions process is eye-opening for young people in all the wrong ways. It’s a powerful introduction to the values of adult society, and many young people are morally troubled, sometimes deeply so, by what they experience. Many students across a wide range of communities are acutely aware that the deck is stacked, that there are vast differences in students’ access to counselors, tutors, and other admissions resources (see sidebar on p. 19), and that college is simply unaffordable for staggering numbers of families. Many students bridle at the unfairness of favoring certain students in admissions, such as donor and legacy students, full pay students, and athletes. Many also struggle with how much they can embellish their applications and “play the game” without compromising their own authenticity and integrity.

**How?** It’s clearly critical to create greater equity and fairness in the college admissions system. Talking about these ethical concerns is not a substitute for that. But these types of ethical questions and concerns provide powerful opportunities for helping students take multiple perspectives and develop more mature ethical understandings. Parents can engage their teens in thinking about why well-intentioned people create and participate in unfair systems and to consider the crucial question of how one participates ethically in systems that

one may view as unethical in significant respects. Is it ever ok to cheat in a system that one views as cheating you? Parents and teens might explore the many inequities in this process. Why do they exist? What might be done to remedy them? How can one affect change? They might analyze from various vantage points—including from the perspective of college admissions staff or financial aid officers—the case for and against favoring athletes and children of donors and legacies. Students might be asked to imagine an admissions process that they view as fair and high-integrity and to consider who and what needs to change for this system to exist. All of these conversations, of course, need to be guided by key ethical principles—for example, honesty and fairness are important to strive for in all our interactions and honesty should only be compromised when it is outweighed by other ethical considerations, such as protecting others or oneself from serious harm. Parents might also speak directly with students about the reality that there is in, in fact, a certain “game to be played” in this process, but discuss with students both how to play this game—presenting themselves in ways that are likely to be attractive to college admissions offices—while also presenting themselves authentically. It’s a difficult skill that they are likely to need in various settings throughout life.

#### **4. Be authentic**

**Why?** Many parents fail to have authentic, honest conversations with their teens during the college admissions process, diminishing their role as trusted guides and mentors and

eroding their capacity to support their teen in expressing themselves authentically. We have talked to many young people in middle- and upper-class communities who report that their parents, for example, say that getting into a highly selective college doesn’t matter in one sentence but then badger them about grades or SAT prep in the next. One parent we spoke to told us without a hint of irony: “My husband doesn’t care whether our daughter goes to a high-status college. It’s fine with him if she goes to Swarthmore (a highly competitive and high-status school).” Other students report that their parents play down high-status colleges only because at some level their parents know that they live in a neighborhood and attend schools that will do the muscling for them. “My parents don’t have to say anything about how important it is [that I go to a high-status college] and I’m still going to feel a lot of pressure in my community to go to one of those places,” a 17-year-old from a town outside Boston says. “The only reason they can tell themselves they’re not pressuring me is that there’s already huge pressure on me.” Still other students view their parents as showing their hand when they protest too loudly about other parents’ intense focus on selective colleges. As one high school student wrote in *U.S. News and World Report*: “My mom delights in anecdotes about the ridiculous activities of ‘psycho moms,’ her name for mothers who are overly anxious about where their children will attend college. This is how she assures herself that she is not as crackers as these women” (Karlin, 2005). Some parents themselves are aware of their hypocrisy: “We tell our children one day that we just want them



## ADMISSIONS INJUSTICE

“How can [Ivy league colleges] compare us to students who have all these tutors and SAT prep courses?” one of a group of students from a low-income community in Jacksonville, Florida, asked. Another added: “We don’t even have access to the Internet at home or calculators for taking the SAT, and we don’t have money for application fees.” As a young person in a wealthy community put it: “The differences in the amount of resources we have [in the college admissions process] compared to other students are crazy.” A high school counselor from an economically depressed coal mining region tells us: “The college admissions system is completely unethical. We tell kids that colleges are a great equalizer and that they will get a fair shot and sooner or later many get, at a time in their lives when they’re really raw about injustice, that that’s just not true.”

to go to a college where they’ll be happy,” a Boston parent tells us, “and the next day we tell them they should go to the best college they can get in to.”

**How?** As parents, many of us need to reckon with these conflicting feelings and talk to others both about these feelings and about how to discuss them authentically with our teen. We also can try to understand what’s “in the water,” scanning the many school and community factors that may be influencing our teen’s college considerations so that we can talk to our

teens in ways that acknowledge these realities. In addition, we can simply ask our teen to alert us if they think we’re sending mixed messages.

Finally, many parents may underestimate what a relief it would be to their teen and the extent to which it would support their teen’s maturity and secure their respect if they stopped dodging and spoke honestly, including at times sharing their own irrational feelings. For example, while it’s important for parents to try to manage their disappointment when their teen is rejected at a college, if parents are visibly disappointed in the presence of their teen, it might help teens a great deal if parents explained why. A parent might explain that they always wanted to attend that college or that they were too caught up in the status of that college and that they recognize that these are their issues to work out.

## 5. Help your teen contribute to others in meaningful ways

**Why?** High school students in some communities are caught up in a kind of community service Olympics, a contest to see who can get an edge in their applications by tackling the most formidable problem, often in a distant country. “In my school you can’t just give flowers to sick people or the elderly,” a student in an affluent community told us. “You have to wipe out AIDS in Africa.” Yet the scale of the problem and the location of the service don’t determine its value. Nor are these factors what’s prioritized by admissions deans. What is most important to the colleges endorsing *Turning the Tide* and the Deans Commitment Letter is whether an

experience is immersive, sustained, chosen based on authentic interest, and provides students opportunities for reflection with both peers and adults. Research suggests, in fact, that students may engage in service for the “wrong reason,” because it’s required, or because they believe it will strengthen their college application, but still benefit from it if it has these characteristics (Hart, Donnelly, Younnis, & Atkins, 2007; Metz & Younnis, 2005; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999).

**How?** Parents can explore with teens what kind of community service or contribution is likely to be meaningful. Especially given our bitterly fractured society, *Turning the Tide* recommends that students have community experiences that increase their ability to take other perspectives, including the perspective of those who differ from them in terms of race, class, political ideology, religious orientation, and other characteristics. Because service can be unintentionally patronizing to recipients and often doesn’t develop in students a rich understanding of other perspectives or cultures, parents can emphasize the importance of “doing with” rather than “doing for.”

Parents can also discuss with their teens why one does service. Discussions may be rooted in, for example, religious beliefs, a commitment to equity and justice, and/or a family ethic that underscores our inherent responsibility to help those who are struggling. To develop young people’s commitment to others and their awareness and skills in working with others, it’s also important for parents to talk to their teen about their service

experiences. What are they learning? Are they finding their work gratifying? Do they feel helpful? Why or why not? What kinds of challenges are they facing and how might these challenges be overcome?

## **6. Advocate for elevating ethical character and reducing achievement-related distress**

**Why?** When high schools and college admissions offices emphasize achievement and give little air time or thought to students’ ethical character, they often argue that they are simply meeting demand, catering to what parents want. Yet too often, all high school educators and admissions officers hear are the loud parents clamoring for an intense focus on achievement. Many colleges and high schools are unlikely to change unless other parents start “walking the talk” and become strong advocates for promoting ethical character and reducing stress.

**How?** Parents need to step up—respectfully but firmly—to advance a very different vision of high schools and the college admissions process. They can press for prioritizing not just academic achievement but ethical character, take a zero-tolerance stance on achievement-related distress, and advocate for greater equity and fairness. This advocacy is both vital to meaningful reform and is a powerful form of modeling for children.

For example, in their contacts with college admissions officers during college visits and in other settings, parents can ask whether ethical character, including concern for others

and the common good, is weighed in the admissions process and, if so, how much and how it is weighed. They can inquire about whether, how, and what types of community contributions are valued and how those contributions are defined and weighed. They can work to reduce achievement pressure by, for instance, asking what percentage of students are admitted— who are not athletes, legacies, or children of donors—who take only a few advanced courses or engage in only a few extracurricular activities.

Parents can also advocate with high school educators for changes that promote greater equity and collaboration rather than competition among students. Parents can encourage creating opportunities for students to share information about colleges with peers and for parents to share information with each other. In wealthier communities, parents can advocate for schools to share college search resources, including guidebooks, college planning tools, and admissions-related curricula, with less wealthy schools and districts. Parents also can directly support equity by, for example, supporting college access organizations with evidence of success. To counter the intense focus on high-status colleges, parents can press high schools to regularly and meaningfully expose students to a wide range of colleges and to stop touting the number of their students accepted at highly selective colleges, instead tracking and publicizing the number of their alumni who report satisfaction and academic engagement at college. Parents can ask schools to conduct simple surveys that provide data about how many students are suffering high

levels of stress, and they can insist that schools develop thoughtful plans and concrete strategies for reducing this stress. Finally, parents can use the Dean's Commitment Letter (see p. 30) to mobilize other parents and to advocate for changes, such as limiting advanced courses and/or setting limits on the amount of time students devote to extracurricular activities.

## **7. Model and encourage gratitude**

**Why?** The college admissions process offers many opportunities for parents to model and cultivate gratitude in their teens. A good deal of research indicates that gratitude is vital to well-being (Sansone & Sansone, 2010; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). It's also a powerful moral emotion. When we appreciate what we have we're more likely to recognize and appreciate what others don't have. That's why gratitude is one key to young people becoming concerned, ethical community members and citizens.

But because they're anxious, self-focused, entitled, or for many other reasons, many teens and parents never experience or express gratitude in this process. Any teen or parent of a teen who is applying to a four-year college that has a strong track record of graduating students should feel grateful for this tremendous opportunity—an opportunity that a great majority of people in the world simply don't have and an opportunity that a staggering number of people in this country can't afford. Only about 45% of Americans will attend a four-year college, and only about 60% of those students will graduate within six years (National

Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Students who attend selective colleges have reason to be very grateful: Only about 25% of college applicants will attend a college that accepts less than half of their applicants (Casselmann, 2016). Teens and their parents, of course, are far more likely to use their immediate community as their reference group in measuring their success in applying to college. But that metric doesn't develop the broader moral lens that enables teens to either appreciate their advantages or to consider the larger questions of justice that these advantages raise.

**How?** In addition to being grateful for the opportunity to attend college, teens should be expected to appreciate the many educators, counselors, and other adults—including their parents—who shepherded them to this point. Parents can ask their teen who they've appreciated in this process and why, and encourage their teen to consider people who may not be on their radar—a teacher, a friend, or a community adult who helped in a quiet, subtle way. As parents, we can also thank people we are grateful to and share that we are grateful to these people with our teen.

## Ethical College Admissions: A Guide for High Schools

How can high schools shape a college search and application process that promotes rather than undermines ethical character? What are key ways that high schools can reduce harmful achievement pressure and promote equity and access

that advance the recommendations in our first *Turning the Tide* report?<sup>6</sup> We offer the following guideposts.

### 1. Set ethical expectations with families

**Why?** Most parents are constructive and responsible in their college admissions-related interactions with schools. But many parents, including those who genuinely want their child's school to promote ethical character, neither model ethical character nor support schools in promoting it in the college admissions process. Some parents become almost paramilitary in advancing their teen's interests and, as one school head put it, "are completely oblivious to children other than their own." Too often, parents pressure their school to provide their child with additional support in the admissions process, for example, or monopolize a school counselor's limited time without considering other students.

**How?** The college admissions process provides a key opportunity for educators to establish what it means for parents to be a member of a caring, ethical community. Schools, for example, might create a "compact" or agreement with parents, an active document that should be referred to throughout the year, that spells out the school's and parents' obligations in promoting ethical character, leveling the playing field, and reducing achievement-related distress in college admissions. Expectations of parents in this compact might include

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<sup>6</sup> Much has been written about how high schools can promote equity and access and reduce achievement pressure in the college admissions process that goes far beyond the scope of this report.

only advocating for new admissions-related activities that benefit a wide range of students and always treating school counselors respectfully. This compact might articulate the many ways parents can directly support students in addition to their own children in the admissions process, including taking additional students on college tours and encouraging their teens to share information and resources about colleges. Schools and parents together might commit to avoiding preparation for standardized college admission testing—a major early source of stress for students—before 10th grade, except when such preparation levels the playing field for low-income or marginalized students. This compact might also include the expectation that parents will contact the school if their teen shows symptoms that suggest achievement-related distress, including not eating or sleeping well. This compact could be developed collaboratively with educators, students, and families.

## **2. Create opportunities for authentic student service and contributions to others**

**Why?** It's important for high schools, like parents, to focus on providing teens not with high-profile service opportunities, but with various ways of contributing to their communities that are chosen based on authentic interest, and that are meaningful and sustained.

**How?** High school counselors and teachers can explore with students what kind of community service or contribution is likely to be meaningful and seek to provide students with a wide range of service opportunities and other

ways to contribute to their communities, such as working to prevent students from being bullied or isolated in their own school. These service opportunities might emphasize “doing with” rather than “doing for.” Students might work together with other teens from diverse backgrounds from their school or other schools—in carefully constructed and facilitated groups—on shared problems, whether an environmental problem, an unsafe park, a high rate of substance abuse, or sexual harassment at school. Schools can also provide students opportunities to reflect on why one does service and on the benefits and challenges of their service experiences.

## **3. Use the admissions process as an opportunity for ethical education**

As with parents, high schools should explore with teens the many ethical questions that the admissions process raises, such as why the admissions process often advantages certain students such as athletes and children of donors, why large inequities in the process exist and what can be done to remedy them, why well-intentioned people participate in unfair systems and how to both express oneself authentically and “play the game,” making oneself attractive to colleges. High schools, like parents, might also ask their teen to imagine what a fair, equitable admissions system would be and consider with teens what needs to change for this system to exist. High schools could utilize a variety of scenarios and role plays to explore these questions.

#### **4. Focus students on daily acts of character and provide evidence of character in applications**

**Why?** Schools have a crucial responsibility to promote cultures and relationships that cultivate concern for others and other key ethical capacities in students, and the endorsers of *Turning the Tide* underscore that a student's daily conduct "is critically important" in admissions. It's thus important for high schools not only to help students develop these capacities but also to capture and communicate them in students' applications.

**How?** Minimally, schools might provide guidelines to school counselors and teachers that both help them assess the capacities that comprise ethical character and that guide them in describing these capacities in recommendations. Schools might also develop deeper and more comprehensive ways of capturing these capacities. For example, over the last two years we have piloted an assessment in several high schools that relies in part on anonymous peer assessments to identify students who are caring, fair, and helpful, including helpful to students who are marginalized or struggling. Peers often have the most insight into how students conduct themselves across multiple contexts. Because peers also clearly have their biases and are prone to select more popular students, we hope in the coming years to create a system that is widely available to schools that includes not only peer input but teacher input and perhaps the input of other school adults, such as athletic coaches, and that guides all assessors in considering quieter students who may be less well

known. School systems and schools—in consultation with assessment experts—might develop their own ethical character assessments, or might utilize validated, research based measures such as the Enrollment Management Association's Character Snapshot or ACT's Tessara. Schools can also regularly assess key dimensions of ethical character, such as whether students work well in groups, on report cards and other evaluations. This information might be aggregated electronically in ways that could both help recommenders describe students' progress and help students themselves describe their own progress.

#### **5. Guide students in reporting their substantial family contributions and challenges**

**Why?** As *Turning the Tide* recommends, schools should guide teens in reporting not just community service and contributions but substantial family responsibilities. Many teens are unable to engage in community service or activities outside the home because they spend substantial time supporting their families. Yet tasks such as assisting an elderly relative, supervising a younger sibling, or working at a job to contribute to family income are commonly unreported in the college admissions process, even though these ongoing responsibilities may be far more likely than community service to promote key ethical, social, and emotional capacities such as compassion, selflessness, perseverance, and respect. These family commitments also provide crucial context for admissions officers in evaluating applicants. Too often,



admissions offices are unaware of the impressive aptitude and determination of a student who manages, for example, to get mostly B's in school while supervising a younger sibling or working 20 hours a week. Many students are also dealing with personal or family challenges, whether an anxiety disorder, a chronically ill parent, or a drug-addicted sibling, that significantly interfere with their learning and that provide important context for assessing their academic performance.

**How?** Students often don't report these responsibilities and challenges for many reasons. They may be embarrassed to report them, don't think to report them—they're just "in the water," what they do day to day—or don't imagine that this type of contribution is valued. Application materials also often don't encourage students to report these types of family commitments or prompt students with specific examples. Schools can underscore the importance of these responsibilities, assure students that their responses will be treated confidentially, and guide students in reporting them, including providing examples.

## **6. Focus students on a wide range of colleges**

**Why?** At the core of excessive achievement pressure is one fundamental myth: Only a small number of elite colleges will position students for success. Large numbers of teens, abetted by their parents and often their schools, are anxiously trying to land a spot in a handful of highly selective colleges, convinced that these colleges are far more likely to set them up for

satisfying and lucrative careers. These students will continue to be hounded by fears of disappointing or shaming their parents and themselves until they and their parents embrace the reality that their chances are very high of being accepted at one of a wide ranges of colleges that are just as likely to lead to success. As the deans emphasize in *Turning the Tide*, there are hundreds—if not thousands—of excellent colleges in this country, and many colleges that are not highly selective are better suited for a particular student.

**How?** There is much that high schools can do to elevate a broad array of colleges, including the following:

- **Present the facts.** A good deal of research, summarized in a recent white paper by Challenge Success at Stanford University, *A Fit Over Rankings: Why College Engagement Matters More Than Selectivity*, makes a powerful case that differences in colleges' selectivity makes little or no difference in students' learning and later job satisfaction and general well-being after college. There may be minimal financial benefits to attending a highly selective college, but the research is mixed. What *does* appear to matter, according to this paper, is academic engagement. Whether students are engaged in classrooms and campus life appears to be a good deal more important in determining how much they learn, how happy they are during and after college, and how much they care about their communities

than how selective a college is. High schools that cultivate students' interests and curiosity and engage students in deep and meaningful learning are thus creating the motivations and habits of mind at the core of well-being in college and beyond. High schools where students experience courses as a means to an end are more likely to undermine both the means and the end.

- **Mix it up.** Schools should meaningfully expose students to colleges that vary in selectivity and to alternative pathways to careers. High schools can, for example, create opportunities for alumni who attended less-selective colleges or chose alternative pathways to share compelling stories with students and parents, require students to read books such as *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be* or *Colleges that Change Lives*, which provides examples of excellent colleges that tend to fly under students' and parents' radars, and invite admissions officers from many different types of colleges to present to students. In guiding students, schools can focus on match rather than status or rankings by, for example, holding a "blind" college fair where colleges' characteristics are presented without names attached.
- **Avoid commercial rankings.** Schools can work to reduce the influence of commercial college rankings, which commonly have little to do with a college's real

educational value and focus students and parents inordinately on highly selective colleges. Schools might, for example, create a statement that describes the serious flaws in these ranking systems and strongly discourages students and parents from utilizing them.

- **Focus on meaningful outcomes.** Schools can eliminate communications to parents and prospective students that identify the percentage of graduates who attend highly selective colleges and communicate instead the percentage of alumni who report satisfaction at the colleges they attend.
- **Utilize media tools.** Launch an awareness campaign with neighboring schools elevating a wide range of colleges and alternative pathways to careers that tend not to be on students and parents radar. This campaign might include regular communications with teens and parents that feature lesser-known, high-quality colleges, video clips promoting these colleges (which will soon be available in Google searches) and distributing paraphernalia from these colleges to students, e.g., t-shirts, cups and pens.

## **7. Create limits on advanced courses and discourage students from overloading on extracurricular activities**

**Why?** As the Deans' Commitment Letter underscores (see p. 30), large numbers

of students lack access to advanced courses, and it's crucial to increase these students' access to more advanced work. Similarly, many of these students don't have access to quality extracurricular activities, or are limited by "pay to play" programs that favor students with resources. It is critical to increase and strengthen the many public and private "out of school time" efforts that seek to provide these opportunities. At the same time, students in some middle- and upper-class communities feel driven to take more advanced courses than they can reasonably handle. In these situations, schools should take steps to reduce the

pressure on students to overload on advanced courses.

**How?** Schools need to have comprehensive and mission-driven conversations about what is a healthy and balanced academic load for their students. Educators might consider creating clear guidelines that prevent students from overloading on high level (AP/IB/Advanced) courses each year. For some schools this might mean limiting the number of high level courses that students may take annually, and for other schools it could mean incorporating an advising system that ensures students can pursue rigor in

## EDUCATING CITIZENS

Until the middle of the last century, the chief mission of most schools and colleges in this country was not promoting academic achievement, but cultivating individuals who are respectful, responsible, and engaged citizens (Hunter, 2000; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012). But in recent decades, the intense pressure to promote academic performance—partly driven by perceptions of what college admissions offices value—has crowded out attention to ethical character. In our surveys of a diverse range of high schools around the country, students are about four times more likely to view their schools as prioritizing their academic advancement than their care for others. When educators do talk about character, they commonly refer to those capacities that allow individuals to achieve at higher levels—qualities like perseverance, planning, grit, resilience—what's called "performance character." Important as these qualities are, they are not ethical qualities. People who persevere or are resilient can be deeply humane or deeply inhumane.

To be sure, many high schools are engaged in some type of character education or social-emotional learning effort designed to promote caring for others and other ethical capacities. But we have worked with hundreds of schools over the last 20 years, and it is the exceptional high school or middle school that is anywhere near as deliberate and systematic in cultivating students' ethical character as they are in promoting academic achievement, and many social and emotional learning and character education initiatives appear to have little or no impact (Schaps, Schaeffer, & McDonnell, 2001). Further, with some exceptions, character education efforts have failed to respond to the moral troubles of our times. It is the rare school, for example, that teaches students to "talk across the aisle," constructively engaging those who don't share their political views. The distressing fact that far too many of us are living in ideological bubbles is continually reproduced in our schools.

their courses while maintaining appropriate balance. Similarly, schools can discourage students from overloading on extracurricular activities. Schools should share widely with students and parents that the Deans' Commitment Letter states clearly that 2-3 activities are sufficient (see p. 31). While schools might support students in trying out a range of activities, they can also strongly encourage students to cut back on activities if they become stressful and to consider focusing deeply on a small number of meaningful activities. Further, schools might work with school staff to limit the number of hours students attend activities and sport practices each week. Given the unique context of each school's curricular offerings, daily schedule and extracurricular opportunities, a blanket recommendation for specific limits on courses or activities is difficult. It is incumbent upon schools, however, to intentionally survey students, faculty, and parents on an ongoing basis to assess homework loads, pace of life and student well-being and engagement. Based on the results, schools should establish appropriate limits that reduce stress and lead to more meaningful engagement in courses and activities and adapt these limits as needed.

## **A Call To Action for Middle and High Schools**

In January 2018, Making Caring Common launched a national campaign, the Caring Schools #CommonGood campaign, that called on high schools and middle schools to take new steps aligned with these guideposts. In addition, this campaign has sought more

generally to mobilize middle and high schools to return to what has been the purpose of education in this country throughout much of our history: preparing young people to be caring, ethical community members and citizens (Hunter, 2000). The problems now besetting our country—including widespread individualism, tribalism, the daily “shout” shows, everyday social-media hostility, spikes in hate crimes, and waning faith in democracy—are the result of complex trends over many years. But at their core is a deep, large-scale educational failure.

Our school campaign seeks to ignite concern about this critical challenge and to encourage and support middle and high schools in taking at least one significant new step that advances one or more of *Turning the Tide's* goals. While the main focus of this campaign is on preparing young people to be caring, ethical community members and citizens, we also have encouraged schools to take steps to promote greater equity and reduce excessive achievement pressure in the admissions process.

To date, 189 middle and high schools in the U.S. have committed to taking a substantial new action as part of the campaign. Crucially, they've also committed to holding themselves accountable by assessing the efficacy of their action and changing course if necessary.

These schools are seeking to move the needle in various ways. Many schools are taking actions that aren't focused on college admissions specifically but that

more broadly cultivate ethical character. Some schools, for example, are adopting research-based practices that promote key ethical capacities such as empathy and gratitude, while other schools are guiding students in “talking across the aisle,” in discussing controversial issues with those who don’t share their political and religious beliefs. Ninety-two of our schools have committed to leveraging the power of student leaders in creating welcoming, inclusive, and caring school environments.

Some high schools are taking new steps to strengthen the college prospects of economically disadvantaged students, including guiding students in compiling and articulating information about their family responsibilities in their college application process. Several schools are partnering in reciprocal relationships that promote equity and access in college admissions. For example, a group of schools in the Boston area are planning to jointly develop a college counseling institute where counselors from an economically diverse set of schools can share best practices. Some schools in affluent communities, aware of the glaring gaps in resources between their schools and schools with predominantly low-income students, are planning to share with other schools college search tools and college counseling resources. To reduce excessive achievement pressure, other schools have committed to establishing clear guidelines that mitigate stress for students who wish to enroll in multiple advanced courses. A [full list of schools](#) joining the campaign is available on the Making Caring Common website.

These schools clearly represent a small fraction of middle and high schools in the country and their actions are just a start. Our hope is that these schools will create a “positive contagion,” spurring other schools to take new, substantial actions. Our hope is also to connect schools in our campaign in ways that enable them to share effective practices and receive feedback on challenges. Further, we seek to support these schools in developing increasingly comprehensive approaches to promoting ethical character, drawing on thoughtful, comprehensive frameworks (see, for example, Character.org).

Perhaps most important, this campaign seeks to help generate a nationwide conversation about whether schools are holding themselves accountable for preparing students to be caring, ethical community members and citizens. Minimally, middle and high schools should periodically ask students brief, simple questions on surveys that are key to real accountability and continuous improvement (see call-out box on p. 26).

## CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY

According to Making Caring Common's 2014 national survey, a majority of educators report that promoting their students' care for others is more important than promoting their achievement. But as we have noted, students are far more likely to perceive educators as focused on their achievement than their care for others. That creates an opportunity for educators to start a conversation about the messages they send to students about what they value and why, to take actions that are more consonant with their stated values, and to hold themselves accountable. One straightforward approach is to periodically ask students in brief surveys the degree to which they perceive that achievement is prioritized in their classrooms and school in relation to caring for others, e.g., "Is it more important to my teachers that I get in to a 'good' college or that I'm a good person?" Making Caring Common is developing a brief survey tool that enables students and faculty to assess what students perceive as school priorities as well as the quality of school relationships and levels of discrimination based on race, class, gender, and other characteristics. Principals and district leaders can also regularly ask all adults in the building, including teachers, administrators, athletic coaches, arts teachers, and counselors, what they're doing to promote in students greater concern and respect for others and their communities, and school adults can hold each other accountable for monitoring and deepening these efforts. In our experience with schools, it is this kind of commitment to accountability and continuous improvement that begins to meaningfully affect students' ethical development.

### A Commitment from Admissions Deans

In early 2017, we began working with college admissions deans on a statement of commitment designed to support schools in our campaign as well as other schools in advancing *Turning the Tide's* goals. This statement was also sparked by conversations with scores of high school leaders and counselors, who told us repeatedly that too often the admissions process impedes their efforts to advance the report's goals, reinforces a narrow, damaging version of achievement, and marginalizes attention to students' ethical development. More specifically, we heard that admissions offices

needed to move beyond rhetoric and make an explicit commitment to value ethical character in the admissions process. Similarly, we heard that, rather than simply claiming they value quality over quantity, admissions offices ought to provide concrete assurance that no student will be penalized for taking too few advanced courses if a high school limits or doesn't provide these courses. These educators similarly wanted assurance that students wouldn't be disadvantaged for engaging in only two or three extracurricular activities. We collaborated with a group of college admission deans and were assisted by the Education Conservancy in developing a letter of commitment that provides these assurances. This letter has now



been signed by almost 140 college admissions deans from a wide variety of colleges across the country. In the letter, the deans not only distill the kind of community service and contributions they value, but move beyond *Turning the Tide's* general statement about the importance of ethical engagement and specifically pledge to consider attributes in addition to standardized test scores and grades, including whether students will “contribute to [their] campus and society in meaningful ways.” In addition, the deans pledge to give significant weight to substantial family commitments and contributions and encourage students to report these commitments in their applications. Importantly, the deans also provide examples of these commitments and guidance in reporting them.

This letter also provides reassurance related to advanced courses and extracurricular activities. The Deans commit to honoring high schools' curricula and to viewing high school students' academic achievement, such as the number of advanced courses they take, in the context of the curricula available to them. It assumes that high school leaders, with their intimate knowledge of their students and their specific contexts, should shape curriculum and school cultures that make sense for their students and don't create academic distress. This frees high schools to limit advanced courses without fear of their students being disadvantaged in the admissions process at colleges endorsing this letter. Further, the deans provide much-needed clarification and assurance that two to three activities are “sufficient.”

This commitment to viewing high school students in the context of their curricula has significant implications as well for students in under-resourced schools who lack access to advanced courses. Research suggests that colleges that assess context—not only family background and responsibilities, but the academic opportunities that are available to students—are significantly more likely to admit low-income students (Bastedo, Bowman, Glasener, & Kelly, 2018).

We are hopeful that this letter will free up high school educators and parents to initiate innovative and substantial reforms that advance *Turning the Tide's* goals. At the same time, we know that a significant percentage of high school educators will remain skeptical. In previewing this letter with high school leaders and counselors, many have been enthusiastic but others simply don't believe that the deans will change their practices. Some rightly point out that many admissions offices, including some who endorsed this letter, still engage in practices that contradict the letter, such as stating that high school students should take the “most rigorous” courses available to them, language that runs counter to the letter's emphasis on academic quality over quantity. Many high school educators are skeptical that colleges weigh ethical character. It's also true that many colleges did not sign this letter, which means that students may in fact be disadvantaged in applying to these colleges. That makes it important for students and counselors to determine which colleges have endorsed the letter or have committed to honoring high schools' curricula in another way.

Still, there are strong reasons for schools and parents to act on the basis of this letter. In terms of focusing on quality—on meaningful intellectual engagement instead of long “brag sheets” of advanced courses and extracurricular activities—our discussions with admissions officers suggest that many admissions offices *do* value meaningful, quality engagement far more than quantity. We also have heard from several schools that have chosen to eliminate or reduce advanced courses, and educators at these schools report that their students have not been slighted in the admissions process—perhaps one reason that growing numbers of schools appear to be taking this step.

Yet what should be most reassuring to students and parents is that even if some deans do give too much weight to quantity and fail to view students in the context of their school’s curriculum, the cost to students of taking only a few advanced courses is simply not that high. Students who are meaningfully engaged and do well in a small number of advanced courses are less likely to be accepted at some selective colleges, but they are very likely to be accepted at a wide range of very good colleges, and they are likely to have a more sane and gratifying high school experience. The reality is that far too many students, as we’ve described, are strung out gunning for highly selective colleges when they have other choices that are just as good and sometimes better suited to them.

High school educators also have reason to be skeptical about whether college admissions officers weigh concern for others and other ethical qualities. Many

colleges give ethical character little or no weight or don’t capture it effectively, a subject of our next report. Yet ethical character often does matter in selective college admissions. Some college admissions offices weigh ethical character significantly—it’s central in their admissions decisions. Large numbers of colleges appear to weight ethical character when students are “on the bubble”—i.e., when students are virtually identical on other measures. And at many selective colleges where large numbers of applicants have high grade point averages and standardized test scores, a substantial percentage of students are on the bubble. Ethical character matters in admissions in another sense—it’s likely that teachers and counselors who write recommendations are significantly more enthusiastic in general about students whom they view as caring, honest, and fair, among other ethical characteristics.

But here especially, even if admissions offices didn’t weigh ethical character at all, educators and parents, as we’ve pointed out, have a fundamental responsibility to prioritize it in child-raising. To be sure, it’s vital for college admissions offices and other key adult institutions to reinforce the importance of ethical character through the messages they send to students and parents, particularly when colleges also send powerful messages about the importance of other values such as athletic accomplishment, high test scores, and donor and legacy status. But in the end, whether college admissions officers prioritize ethical character should have no bearing on whether parents and educators prioritize it. In the

case of young people’s ethical character, we all need to do far more and far better.

## Conclusion

We have made the case here that it’s crucial for parents and educators to shift their role in college admissions. The admissions process is an opportunity for many of us as parents to get beyond false markers of success and to focus instead on what counts: raising caring, thoughtful, curious, justice-minded children who will help heal our country’s fractures. It’s a chance for us to demonstrate what it means to be a moral person, to avoid doing what’s expedient and falling back on excuses like “everyone is doing it,” and to instead advocate for meaningful change and model moral leadership for our children. It’s an opportunity for both high schools and parents to provide young people with an ethical education, including examining the unfairness and inequities in the admissions system and exploring strategies for remedying them. It’s also a chance for parents and high schools to help teens focus on the colleges that are likely to engage them in the meaningful learning that is at the center of a gratifying life.

At some point, technology might radically reform the college admissions system, or young people themselves might rebel against the parts of the system that create stress and are unfair. But wouldn’t it be better if we as parents and educators took action first? If we are serious about both our children’s ethical character and their happiness—and most parents and educators profess to care about these things above all

else—then we can’t wait for young people or technology to end this contagion. We need to take a hard look at the ways we both explicitly and unintentionally support this system and commit ourselves to real change.

## Appendix A: Progress and Challenges

Over the past three years, we've heard from hundreds of high school leaders, college counselors, teachers, students, parents, admissions staff, admissions consultants, researchers, and leaders of organizations about their views of *Turning the Tide*. Much of what we've heard is encouraging. Certain aspects of the report in particular were widely supported, including the importance of elevating ethical character in college admissions, of students engaging in meaningful and sustained forms of service, and of leveling the playing field for economically disadvantaged students by better capturing their family responsibilities and commitments. Further, numerous college admissions offices made concrete changes prompted at least in part by *Turning the Tide*. These changes included:

- Application revisions, such as adding essay and short-answer questions related to ethical character and reducing the number of spaces for reporting extracurricular activities to discourage students from overloading on these activities,
- Revising admissions materials to emphasize the importance of ethical engagement, providing new scholarships focused on ethical character and shifting recruiting practices to focus on students with ethical character.
- Improving assessment systems to better capture ethical character

and students' family responsibilities.

- Becoming "test optional" in part as a result of *Turning the Tide*.
- Reducing barriers to access, such as waiving application fees

A [full list](#) of colleges that have endorsed *Turning the Tide* or the Deans Commitment Letter can be found on the Making Caring Common website.

In addition, we have collaborated with the Coalition for College, which has made several changes aligned with *Turning the Tide*. These changes include adding an essay question focused on ethical character and encouraging and guiding students in reporting family responsibilities. We are now collaborating with the Common Application on short- and long-term changes that advance *Turning the Tide's* goals, including adding optional short essay questions; revising recommendation forms to support ethical character as well as equity and access; and harnessing the influence of their Reach Higher messaging platform. As part of a three-year grant from the John Templeton Foundation we also have collaborated with numerous college admissions offices to improve their assessment of students' ethical, social, and emotional capacities. Finally, we have advised Google in their efforts to provide crucial information to students about which colleges are affordable and committed to their success. Google College Search now provides students easy access to information about college

graduation rates, average college costs after student aid is applied, and graduates' typical annual income ten years after enrollment.

*Turning the Tide* also generated many significant, concrete changes at the high school level that we describe on p. 28. Because the initial report received a great deal of media attention, it also sent an important message to students, parents, and educators that concern for others is valued in admissions and spawned many important conversations among parents, educators, students, and other stakeholders in college admissions in this country and several other countries about implementing the report's goals. Finally, several nonprofits have been influenced by the work of *Turning the Tide*. For example, the Gates-funded scholarship platform RAISE.ME is now offering "family assistance" scholarships for students who make substantial contributions to their families.

At the same time, we are keenly aware of how much has not changed. As we've described, some colleges, despite endorsing *Turning the Tide*, engage in practices that contradict the report recommendations, such as encouraging students to take "the most rigorous courses available to them." Some of our endorsers still give very little or no weight to ethical character in admissions and they have done little or nothing to increase equity and access or to decelerate achievement pressure. Many college admissions offices do not weight ethical character nearly as much as they weight athletic excellence, high standardized test scores, or donor and legacy status, and that sends a very

troubling message to young people. Many college admissions officers, high school educators, and parents continue to point fingers at each other rather than taking hard, meaningful steps to deal with these serious problems themselves.

We hope the work we describe here and in our next two reports will move the needle on these problems. We are also encouraged by the promise of the Coalition for College, our new collaboration with the Common Application, and by other organizations and efforts that are seeking important reforms, such as the Character Collaborative, the Education Conservancy, and the Mastery Transcript Consortium, a coalition of independent and public schools that seek to eliminate grades and to assess students based on their mastery of key concepts. But we are under no illusions about how difficult fundamental change is. It will require imaginative and bold reforms on many fronts.

## Appendix B: Deans Commitment Letter

As admission deans, we recognize that we and the institutions we represent send signals that can shape students' priorities and experiences throughout high school. We seek to work together with other key adults in students' lives to support high school learning that is authentic, meaningful and appropriately challenging, to reduce problems related to excessive achievement pressure in certain communities, and to promote an admissions process that is healthier for students and families.

This document affirms this commitment and serves two core purposes. First, it seeks to build on the recommendations of "Turning the Tide," clearing up misconceptions about what we value in applicants. Second, it affirms our belief in the value of high school educators, parents and students shaping high school curricular and related academic decisions. It is these community members who know best what will make students thrive academically and emotionally in their specific contexts.

### **Our commitment to high school students, parents, and educators:**

- We respect decisions by schools that encourage students to strike an appropriate balance between challenging themselves academically and caring for themselves and others. For that reason, we are committed to honoring these schools' decisions about curricula and instruction. For example, some schools may limit the advanced courses they offer (such as AP and IB courses) and/or limit the number of advanced courses students can take. Students attending such schools will not be disadvantaged in the admissions process. We also value a variety of high school environments, missions, course offerings, requirements, and extracurricular opportunities, and we count on high school personnel to describe via the school's profile the academic and extracurricular environment of their particular school. While we view favorably students who engage in rigorous courses, we place more value on the quality of students' academic engagement than on the number of advanced courses they take.
- We recognize that large numbers of students have access to very few—if any—advanced courses. We view increasing these students' access to such



courses as critically important. These students will be reviewed in the context of what courses are available to them and will not be penalized in admissions decisions because they lack opportunities to take advanced courses.

- We will not penalize in the admissions process students who engage in only a few extracurricular activities in high school. While there are good reasons for some students to engage in numerous extracurricular activities, we view meaningful engagement in two to three activities as sufficient.
- We pledge that family commitments and obligations, such as taking care of a younger sibling or working at a job to contribute income to the family, are highly valued by our admission staff and will be considered in admissions decisions. We encourage students to report these responsibilities in their applications.
- We are more interested in what students have learned from community engagement and service and what they have contributed to others than in whether students started a new project or conducted service in a far-away country. While many students can benefit from service work in other countries, service work done locally is typically just as meaningful. What matters to us is not whether service was local or in a distant place but whether service deepened

students' understanding of themselves, others and their communities and increased their commitment to others and the public good.

- We will consider students' applications holistically. This means that we will not only consider students' grades and standardized test scores (if we require them) but will also consider other important attributes, including how they might contribute to our campus and society in meaningful ways. We are interested in what students have learned and want to learn, what they care about and why, and what they have done to pursue their interests and passions. We value students who are authentic and honest in their applications. Because colleges vary in many respects, including their curricula, values and expectations of students, it's important for prospective students to review carefully college admission office materials and websites.

A full list of deans endorsing this letter is available on the Making Caring Common website at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-2-parents-high-schools-college-admissions>.

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