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PROJECT



Character Assessment in College Admission

A Guide Of Best Practices With Accompanying Resources

Trisha Ross Anderson and Richard Weissbourd

Featuring contributions from Tara Nicola, Kristína Moss G. Gunnarsdóttir, Brennan Barnard, Samantha Wettje, and the Character Collaborative.

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We are thankful to the Character Collaborative, led by David Holmes and Bob Massa. They helped organize numerous materials and conversations that informed this guide. Thanks to Samuel Rikoon for his guidance and facilitation skills and to all members of the Character Collaborative’s “resource guide” committee for their important contributions.

Finally, thank you to the admission leaders with whom we have partnered over the past two years to tackle difficult and important assessment-related challenges; this guide is a testament to the lessons we learned in our work together. Thanks also to the broad array of admission leaders who have made time in their busy days to review and edit versions of this guide—we are very grateful.

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A Note To The Reader

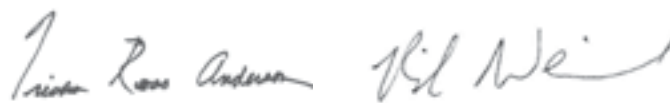
Dear Admission Leader,

We hope this resource is helpful as you consider why and how to assess character in admission. This guide builds on the progress of our Turning the Tide¹ initiative, our surveys of admission deans, and our formal and informal collaborations with dozens of admission leaders and high schools over the past three years. What we heard from admission leaders is strong interest in assessing character more effectively. That interest was very encouraging, given persuasive research suggesting that certain emotional, social, and ethical capacities and skills—including self-awareness, gratitude, empathy, collaboration skills, 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. And that interest seems especially important now, given that many schools are eliminating or reducing their reliance on standardized tests and are seeking other ways to assess applicants’ potential.

While there are no easy answers in this work, we hope this guide will provide starting points, valuable guideposts, and fresh ideas for you.

Although we argue that there are common, key principles and characteristics of effective character assessment, this guide is not prescriptive. It is written more as a “choose your own adventure” story; as the leader of your institution, you will make the difficult and important decisions about how to measure and consider applicant character based on your mission, your community, and other factors. Our goal is to provide tools and a map for you that are based in best practices and research.

We welcome feedback as you engage with this resource and in this meaningful work (collegeadmissions@makingcaringcommon.org). If you develop additional tools or wisdom to share, we hope you will tell us, so that we can share widely and better guide others.



Trisha Ross Anderson and Richard Weissbourd

1. *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions* was published in 2016. It marked the first time in history that a broad coalition of college admission offices joined forces to collectively encourage high school students to focus on meaningful ethical and intellectual engagement. The report includes concrete recommendations to reshape the college admission process and promote greater ethical engagement, reduce excessive achievement pressure, and level the playing field for economically disadvantaged students in the college admission process. The report is available here: <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>

Introduction

Goals of this guide

- Offer new, potentially powerful ways for colleges to integrate and assess student character and other non-cognitive skills and capacities as part of the admission process.
- Provide concrete tips and tools for colleges doing this work.

How the guide is intended to be used

- This guide is primarily intended for use in college admission offices and seeks to be practical for admission leaders.
- The guide is divided into smaller, individual “resources/appendices” for ease of use. You can use one resource or all of the resources. They are available for download here: <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview>
- This guide is intended to elevate important core principles and practices in assessment and it focuses on a process that colleges can use to make key decisions. While we encourage you to adhere to the principles described here, we also know that admission deans, given their particular institutional goals and challenges, need to customize.

Making Caring Common

[Making Caring Common](#),¹ a project of the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#),² seeks to help adults raise children who care about others and the common good. We develop resources to support educators and parents in this work. We also leverage the power of key adult institutions, such as [college admission](#),³ to send messages to young people about the importance of concern for others and the common good. And we work with the media to put concern for others front and center in child-raising, including publishing timely reports on biases, harassment, and other forms of harm in childhood

that undermine empathy and moral growth.

Origin of this guide

As part of our [Turning the Tide initiative](#),⁴ and funded through a generous grant by the [John Templeton Foundation](#),⁵ Making Caring Common began researching in 2017 how colleges assess “character,” including social, emotional, and ethical skills and capacities. As part of this work, we surveyed admission leaders to better understand the tools and processes college admission offices use—and have historically used—to assess applicants’ character.

Beginning in 2018, we worked with five partner colleges and our project Advisory Board to identify and pilot new admission questions and processes that we hoped would provide new information about character in admission. Based on this pilot, our survey, and many formal and informal conversations with experts and admission leaders, we produced the following guide of best practices. Many admission leaders, including members of the [Character Collaborative](#),⁶ offered insight and resources that informed the final version of this guide.

The challenges of assessment

Non-cognitive/character skills are notoriously difficult to measure. Assessing character skills in a competitive admission process makes matters far more difficult, and there are formidable challenges in developing universal assessment tools that serve the specific needs of diverse colleges. Many existing character assessment measures have not been rigorously evaluated for use in diverse groups.

While there are no easy answers in this work, we hope this guide will provide starting points, valuable guideposts, and fresh ideas for you.

Even fewer have been evaluated for use in “high-stakes” decision-making environments. In admission processes, character and specific character attributes can be ill-defined and poorly measured—and admission readers aren’t always well-trained to adequately measure various character attributes or to weigh them appropriately in admission decisions. Admission offices often don’t use rubrics that provide concrete examples of what constitutes evidence of a skill or experience in an application. In some colleges, admission offices give applicants some type of overall “character” score, for example, but one admission reader may be assessing diligence and another reader may be assessing curiosity or humility. Many readers appear to give “character” scores based on even more widely divergent factors that include whether students will increase campus diversity, whether they’ve engaged in extracurricular activities, or whether they’re perceived to be a good fit in terms of campus culture.

Because many applicants feel great pressure associated with admission decisions, they also understandably work hard to present the best version of themselves in their applications and to conceal problems and challenges. This tension between offering the “true” vs “best” version of one’s self in applications compounds the challenge of understanding and assessing applicant character. In addition, in many places, readers have very limited time to review individual applications. Consider large universities where legions of admission officers are rifling through as many as 80,000 applications each year. According to one study,⁷ admission officers at large universities spend about eight minutes per application.

Admission officers at large universities spend about eight minutes per application.

Even in places that have comparatively generous time to read applications, time for new tool development and accompanying training is limited.

Why is this guide needed?

Colleges need new assessments not only to more accurately and fairly identify and weigh key non-cognitive, social, ethical, and emotional capacities, but also to send different signals to students about what colleges—and by extension society—value. Colleges may, intentionally or unintentionally, tacitly underscore the importance of participating in high numbers of AP courses and extracurricular activities, for example, rather than underscore meaningful academic engagement or contributions to others. Colleges often measure what’s easily measurable but not what’s meaningful. Colleges could be sending—via their assessment systems and related admission materials and decisions—far more authentic and powerful messages about the importance of, for example, curiosity, open-mindedness, perspective-taking, self-awareness, and generosity. Current assessment systems also often increase inequities.

Better assessment can allow colleges to admit more, better-matched students.

The current admission system isn’t fair not only because wealthy students have many more resources and supports in applying than those less well-off, but also because the strengths of many students whose grades and test scores are average or below average aren’t adequately captured in the current process. That’s true, in part, because family demands and burdens of various kinds are commonly not identified or weighted in the admission process. A student might, for example, work 20 hours a week to support their family and take care of a sibling after school and still manage to obtain a “B-” average, but the admission process often fails to capture this student’s impressive determination

and academic aptitude. Or a student may be taking care of a depressed or sick parent yet this crucial context is overlooked. Better assessment can also allow colleges to admit more, better-matched students. Colleges are looking for new enrollment tools—ways to identify students that are likely to be successful at their institution but who may not perform well on traditional academic measures such as standardized tests. Better assessment enables colleges to consider a wider range of applicants and to accept students that are most likely to succeed in their institution.

Some colleges, encouragingly, are now seeking to improve their assessment and selection systems. And all colleges can work to improve these systems, given the significant flaws in even the best assessment systems and the high stakes of these assessments for both applicants and colleges. We hope this guide is an important first step.

Is character assessment only for certain types of schools?

No. Unfortunately, some think of character considerations in admission as a “luxury” only afforded to highly selective colleges. That’s simply not true. While selective institutions can use character assessments to help identify top candidates as part of a holistic admission process, less-selective or broad-access institutions can also use these assessments in the admission process. Most colleges in the United States admit a majority of their applicants. In these institutions, character can be used to identify students with potential who would not have been admitted based on traditional academic measures, such as the student described above who works 20 hours a week to provide family income and demonstrates many strengths in doing so, including diligence and responsibility for others.

Won’t this assessment be “gamed?”

To be sure, some people, given the high stakes of college admission, will try to game any assessment system. But it’s entirely possible to develop higher quality assessment tools that better weed out inauthenticity. In addition, some types of gaming are clearly better than others, and one goal of assessment should be to maximize the benefits of gaming. Consider the benefits to applicants who believe that colleges are looking for students that “care about others” and, as a result, take up community service in ways that they end up finding personally rewarding.

Research suggests that the benefits of service are determined not by whether it’s required, but by whether it’s high-quality and meaningful—whether students are able to choose service opportunities that are meaningful to them and whether service is well-structured, sustained, and provides opportunity for reflection with both peers and adults⁸.

In *Turning the Tide* we recommend community service opportunities that bring together students in well-structured and facilitated racially and economically diverse groups—“doing with” rather than “doing for”—and taking on local community challenges, such as a high rate of sexual harassment or a park that is unsafe. Our assumption is that these types of activities are likely to lead to far more constructive attitudes and skills and forms of self and social awareness than gaming by loading up on AP courses or extracurricular activities or securing a leadership opportunity that is stressful and of little interest. Similarly, colleges that elevate the importance of collaboration may motivate students to seek collaborative endeavors that develop their group skills.

Doing The Best We Can Do

All assessment tools have significant flaws and limitations. We're a long way from perfect assessments of human potential. Assessment systems are thus very easy to criticize. It's important to convey that the goal of character assessment is not to be perfect but to be better, to develop more reliable and valid ways of determining key components of character, and to get well beyond subjective, visceral judgements with all their limitations and biases. Our intent is to help colleges be as thoughtful, informed, rigorous, and comprehensive in character assessment as possible, given inherent challenges (e.g., limited resources, lack of evidence-based tools in admission contexts, competing priorities, etc.). We hope that someday powerful, well-validated, and evidence-based admission assessment tools will be available that will work for a wide variety of colleges. Meanwhile, there is a great deal that you can do right now to assess character more accurately, fairly, and meaningfully.



General Tips

Tip 1: Draw from research

Fortunately, there is good information available from social scientists about character skills and capacities and corresponding assessment options. When assessing character in admission, draw from existing research and/or theory wherever possible. This includes incorporating research when choosing specific skills to consider and assess in applicants, when culling definitions and examples of those skills, and in implementing measurement tools and rubrics. Where feasible, consult with experts/researchers to learn more about the most current tools that have promise in admission contexts and to inform a research-based definition of all assessed skills. Making Caring Common's compendium of definitions of character terms and skills is a place to start (see [Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission](#)).

Tip 2: Be selective

Pick applicant character skills or capacities to assess that are most correlated with student success and/or are otherwise important to your institution; these should stem from, or connect to, your institution's mission/values. Attempt to be as specific as possible when identifying skills in applicants (e.g., better to identify "compassion for others" vs. "good character"). Ideally, conversations about values and skills important to your institution should be determined in collaboration with university leaders, faculty, students, and/or admission staff. Where possible, consider a Thrivers study to help identify the students, skills, and capacities most associated with success in your institution. (See [The Thrivers Study: A Tool for Understanding the Characteristics of Successful Students](#).) Once you've arrived at your list, be prepared to define the skill, provide examples of the skill, and assess the skill in all applicants (e.g., don't select more skills than you are prepared to assess reasonably well in all applicants).

Tip 3: Align skills, messages, questions

Once you have identified the skills and capacities that are important to your institution, ensure that your institution's marketing materials, presentations, and application clearly articulate those desired skills. If your school strongly promotes diligence, for example, consider an audit of your materials to ensure that diligence is addressed and defined on your website, in speaking events, and, ideally, in the application itself and/or on the application help/guidance page. Where possible, consider asking a question about "diligence" as part of your application (see [Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission](#) and [Sharing Institutional Values: Examples from College Admission Websites](#)).

Tip 4: Establish definitions and inclusive examples

Develop clear definitions and examples, based in available research, of each skill and capacity you wish to consider in applicants. What does it "look like" for an applicant to have this skill or capacity? How might this skill present in a letter of recommendation, essay response, or in the list of extracurricular activities an applicant provides? Be mindful to include diverse stakeholders in these conversations and to consider examples that include people of all backgrounds. For instance, many people look for examples of community service when evaluating applicants' compassion. However, compassion can be found just as readily when reviewing applicants' everyday interactions with peers (Is the applicant thoughtful and sympathetic in their interactions with others? Do they show kindness to everyone—including those who may be seen as "different"?). Alternatively, a student that spends hours each week taking care of a younger sibling or working to support the family income may be expressing compassion. A definition/example of compassion that only includes community service

As you pilot new processes and tools, periodically collect implementation feedback from leadership, applicants, and admission staff (e.g. How did the tools work? How practically useful is the data collected? How do we know?)

Tip 9 | Collect and Review Data



would not be inclusive to all applicants, many of whom show compassion in alternate ways.

Tip 5: Resist the urge to collapse skills

Resist the urge to merge capacities or skills together for assessment purposes. For example, do not provide one overall, general “character” or “SEL” score, which can oversimplify the complexity of human experience, incorporate reader bias, and tells you little about whether the applicant has skills/capacities that are predictive of success. Instead, clearly identify, define, and give supporting examples of each capacity or skill you wish to assess in applicants (e.g., grit or empathy for others). Take care to distinguish between ethical character (skills and capacities including empathy, compassion, etc.) and performance character (including grit, resilience, or diligence). The former is about being a good person and the latter is about achievement. The two types of character are not the same and it’s important to develop both types of character.

Tip 6: Require evidence and incorporate rubrics

When assessing skills and capacities in applicants, do not allow readers to rely on a “gut” feeling. “Gut” feelings often unintentionally harbor biases and are inherently subjective. Instead, provide readers with rubrics that clearly outline the range of scores an applicant might receive for every skill to be assessed. The clearer that the rubric is about what constitutes a “3” versus a “4” and the more examples that are provided the better. As readers assign scores, consider requiring them to collect evidence justifying their score choice and allow space for these comments in your reading materials/forms. While some admission readers are nervous about assigning a “score,” the truth is that most institutions already assign value to character—often unconsciously. Clear rubrics and scores are a way to objectify what can often feel like a biased and subjective process. See [Examples of College Admission Character Assessment Tools](#).

Tip 7: Offer substantive, high-quality professional development

Assessing character effectively and efficiently takes time and practice. As much as possible, it is important to provide substantive, high-quality training to admission staff about why character matters in admission (see [Why Character Matters in College Admission Presentation Template](#) for a slide deck template on this topic), and which character skills are important to your institution and why. It is also critical to show examples of how these skills might be identified in an application and to walk readers through the use of any and all rubrics. Where feasible, implicit bias training is helpful and important, as are opportunities for readers to practice assessing character skills and to discuss their ratings and questions with fellow admission staff. Where disagreements and ratings vary across readers, these are opportunities for discussion and refinement of training or procedures.

Tip 8: Pilot, evaluate, review, repeat

It is important to remember that, in many ways, character assessment in admission work is still in its infancy and this work is often exploratory—learning is part of the process! Where possible, explore the merits of new application “inputs,” such as new essay and interview questions (see [Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission](#) for inspiration from other colleges). You might also explore new “performance-based” tasks and technology, such as recorded video or verbal responses to on-the-spot short-answer questions or ethical dilemmas. You might also explore or advocate for changes to letters of recommendation, such as the inclusion of forced-choice ratings and/or the comparison of recommender ratings to student self-report ratings (see [Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders](#)).

Once you’ve tried out a new idea, collect and review data (see Tip 9) to learn more about its utility,

effectiveness, and impact on admission decisions. If the data suggest the tool or process is not accurate or helpful in assessing skills for some or all of the applicants at your institution, consider revising and piloting again.

Tip 9: Collect and review data

Collect and review data frequently when making any and all important decisions related to character assessment. As you pilot new processes and tools, periodically collect implementation feedback from leadership, applicants, and admission staff (e.g., How did the tools work? How practically useful is the data collected? How do we know?). Pause to review data that may suggest the effectiveness and limitations of any new tool and/or may suggest associations between the new information/data solicited from the tool and other measures important to your institution. For example, it is helpful to compare applicants' assigned scores across readers/raters to ensure consistency and to identify the need for additional training/re-calibration opportunities. You may also look to identify associations between character scores/tags assigned and admit rates, applicant performance in high school, and/or applicant background. Consider reviewing data over time (e.g., How are character scores/tags associated with enrolled student "success" at your institution?).

Tip 10: Join the movement

Consider partnering with research institutions that are working to establish nationally vetted and validated character assessments that have potential for use in college admission. These include the Enrollment Management Association's [Character Snapshot tool](#).⁹ The Snapshot, which provides a quick view of a student's character strengths at one point in time, is currently used in independent school admission. ETS and ACT are also currently piloting new non-cognitive assessments that may have potential for use in college admission. You may also partner with admission reform organizations that address issues related to the assessment of character, including [Making Caring Common](#)¹⁰ (authors of [Turning the Tide](#)¹¹), the [Character Collaborative](#),¹² [Reimagining College Access](#),¹³ and the [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#).¹⁴ Finally, where possible, work with high schools and counselors to improve the quality and type of character-related information shared with colleges as part of the admission process (see **Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers** for sharable tips). High schools might also be encouraged to experiment with new school-based character-assessment systems that can provide better, more useful information for high schools themselves and for colleges during the admission process. See **Making Caring Common's guide, Character Assessment in High Schools: Recommendations for the College Admission Process and Beyond**.



1. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>
2. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/>
3. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-by-topic/college-admissions>
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9. <https://ssat.org/snapshot>
10. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>
11. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>
12. <https://character-admission.org/>
13. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access>
14. <https://mastery.org/>



“Once you’ve tried out a new idea, collect and review data to learn more about its utility, effectiveness, and impact on admission decisions.”

Tip 8 | Join the Movement

“It is important to remember that, in many ways, character assessment in admission work is still in its infancy and this work is often exploratory—learning is part of the process.”

How to Start

Assessing character and non-cognitive skills and capacities is complex, and admission offices have many competing priorities. Confused as to where to start? The list below offers a few ideas.

1. Clearly signal your values to applicants

After identifying your values as an institution and the skills and experiences that you seek in applicants (see **Character Assessment Readiness: An Audit Tool for College Admission Offices**), ensure that this information is shared internally, and then consistently and publicly with applicants, educators, parents, and other stakeholders. By explicitly and consistently telling applicants in marketing and application materials about your institution's values—and, importantly, how these values are connected to the skills and experiences that you seek in applicants—you are more likely to recruit applicants that have those values and skills. At the same time, you will be sending young people strong messages that colleges—and by extension, society—value more than just their achievements. Publicize the values you share and the character skills you seek in applicants on your website, in marketing materials, in school presentations, and especially in the application and application instructions. Get applicants excited and talking about what matters most to you! (See **Sharing Institutional Values: Examples from College Admission Websites** for examples.)

2. Check to see that application “inputs” align with your values

As much as possible, make sure that the skills and values that are important to your institution are aligned with the questions that you ask in your application. For example, if your institution prioritizes care for others in applicants, consider asking an essay question about how students have given back to their respective communities. Similarly, if you

have the ability to modify letters of recommendation forms, consider asking recommenders to comment specifically on an applicant's commitment to others. Not only will you have more information about the skills and values you care about in applicants, you'll also be signaling to applicants and/or recommenders that you “walk the walk” in terms of prioritizing values and character skills in admission. (See **Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission**.)

3. Conduct institutional research about student success and failure

A Thrivers Study is one way to research which students are thriving at your institution and what skills, experiences, or behaviors tend to make them successful there. This information can be helpful in admission, where readers can focus on the recruitment, identification, and admission of these students. While there are many ways to complete a Thrivers Study, most studies involve asking key stakeholders (students, faculty, and administration) about the skills and qualities most present in successful students. (See **The Thrivers Study: A Tool for Understanding the Characteristics of Successful Students**.) You may also choose to learn more about students who have not been successful at your institution; this can reveal how these students might be better identified and supported in the future.

4. Build support for character assessment in admission with key stakeholders

Character assessment in admission does not happen in a vacuum. In places where the best work in

character assessment occurs, it is most often with the support of the institutions' faculty, president, board, and other senior leaders. By focusing on why character assessment in admission matters (see [“Why Character Matters in College Admission” Presentation Template](#)), the specific skills you will seek in applicants, and the connection between those skills and values/goals important to the institution, you will begin to make a powerful case.

5. Advocate for changes in letters of recommendation

If you use your own institution-specific application, consider asking recommendation writers to comment on particular character skills and experiences important to your institution and to provide supporting examples. You may consider implementing forced-choice responses that require recommenders to identify top character skills for each applicant (instead of allowing recommenders to suggest the applicant is highly skilled or experienced in all areas). If you use application platforms such as the Common Application or Coalition Application, consider working with these platforms to explore and research new recommendation prompts. Finally, share with high school educators and recommenders examples of the types of information important in your consideration of character (see [Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers](#)). Additional ideas about recommendation form changes can be found in [Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders](#).

6. Ask explicitly about family contributions

Family contributions constitute a large portion of many applicants' out-of-school time and can speak to the applicants' character, including their perseverance, grit, and compassion/empathy. While most admission offices report that applicants' significant family contributions (including taking care of a family member after school or working to support

the family income) are important, applicants are often hesitant to report this sensitive information (or they don't know that these family contributions are highly valued by colleges). By stating explicitly in application instructions that substantial family commitments are valued, and by giving applicants a specific place to list these contributions, colleges can set the record straight. See [Examples of Language that Articulate the Importance of Family Responsibilities in College Admission](#) for inspiration.

7. Endorse the deans commitment letter

The deans commitment letter (see [Deans Commitment Letter](#)), which was created by Making Caring Common in collaboration with *Turning the Tide* endorsers, seeks to clear up misconceptions about what admission offices value in applicants and to affirm the value of high school educators, parents, and students in shaping high school curricular and related academic decisions. Over 140 *Turning the Tide* endorsers have already signed on in support of this letter.

8. Unite with and support reform-based organizations

Consider collaborating with other groups that are focused on character assessment and related reform efforts, including Making Caring Common, authors of [Turning the Tide](#);¹ the [Character Collaborative](#),² which seeks to “change admission practice at the higher and secondary education levels to reflect the significance of character strengths in attaining success in school, college, and work”; and [The Mastery Transcript Consortium](#),³ which explores how new transcript models can better reflect students' experiences, skills, and strengths. [The Reimagining College Access](#) team at the Learning Policy Institute (in collaboration with EducationCounsel and Education First) is also working to support the use of K-12 performance assessments in higher education.⁴



1. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>
2. <https://character-admission.org/>
3. <https://mastery.org/>
4. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access>

Description of Resources

We encourage you to access the resources below on the [Making Caring Common](#) website. Each resource is available as a downloadable PDF.

Resources for College Admission Leaders

Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission

This compendium of select character-related skills/attributes is intended as a starting place for colleges interested in establishing their own definitions of key terms. For each included skill, we offer a quick definition, additional information about the skill, the importance/relevance of that skill, links to other sources about that skill, and early ideas about how it could potentially present itself in an application.

The Thrivers Study: A Tool for Understanding the Characteristics of Successful Students

This practical “how-to” resource explores one college’s experience conducting a Thrivers Study. It includes information about the benefits of conducting this type of research and concrete tips for colleges considering this work.

“Why Character Matters in College Admission” Presentation Template

This PowerPoint template summarizes available research on why character/non-cognitive skills matter in education, careers, life, and the admission process. The template offers suggestions for staff training and customizable placeholder slides for institution-specific content. The template is intended for adaptation and use with a variety of admission stakeholders, including university leadership and in reader training.

Character Assessment Readiness: An Audit Tool for College Admission Offices

This “audit” is designed to help admission leaders determine the extent to which they are using best practices in their character assessment work. It offers key self-reflective questions about current admission practices, institutional strengths, and character assessment successes and opportunities. Designed as a “worksheet,” this document allows admission leaders the space and structure to determine next steps.

Sharing Institutional Values: Examples from College Admission Websites

This document offers examples of colleges that have clearly presented their institutional values on their website and/or have thoughtfully articulated the specific skills and attributes that they seek in applicants.

Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission

This document is a collection of real colleges’ current character-focused essay questions found in applications. This is designed to inspire new ideas.

Examples of Language that Articulate the Importance of Family Responsibilities in College Admission

This document offers a collection of real college and application platforms’ language around the importance of applicants’ family contributions/the value of family-based service. This language may be helpful to include in applications, essay questions, websites, or application support materials. The goal is to suggest explicitly to applicants that family contributions are valued and important in life and in making admission decisions, and for colleges to offer concrete guidance about where and how to report these contributions in the application.

Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders

This document offers early, exploratory ideas on how recommendation forms might be revised to be more equitable to students and more useful to colleges. This document is a work in progress; we hope colleges will continue to work with us to add ideas and to advocate for related reform work in collaboration with key partners.

Ideas Worth Testing: Innovation in Character Assessment In College Admission

This document suggests innovative and concrete character assessment ideas, tools, and systems that have strong promise in college admission work. These ideas and systems are important to pilot and evaluate. This document is a work in progress; we hope colleges will continue to work with us to add ideas and to advocate for related reform work in collaboration with key partners.

Examples of College Admission Character Assessment Tools

This document offers a (de-identified) collection of character assessment-related tools including term/skill definitions, rubrics, and prompts. Examples are anonymous and/or de-identified. This document is a work in progress; we welcome additional tools.

Deans Commitment Letter

This pioneering statement, co-signed by over 140 admission leaders across the country, seeks to give high schools greater freedom in advancing the goals of Turning the Tide and to allay parents' fears of short-changing their child if they don't amass impressive achievements.

Resources for High Schools

Character Assessment in High Schools: Recommendations for the College Admission Process and Beyond

This resource is intended for high schools that want to share better, more helpful information about student character with college admission offices. It includes general tips, promising, new assessment ideas, strategies for sharing information about character with admission offices, and more.

Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers

This document, intended for colleges to share with letter recommendation writers (especially school counselors and teachers), suggests a variety of information points that are important to many colleges; applicant character and personal experiences and traits are prominently featured. Tips for writing character-focused letters are included, as well as a template that outlines the type of information that is considered useful to many colleges.

Last reviewed July 2020.

From Ross Anderson, T. & Weissbourd, R. (2020). Character assessment in college admission: A guide of best practices with accompanying resources. Retrieved from <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu>

Access our full suite of character assessment in college admission resources: <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview>

Making Caring Common Project
Harvard Graduate School of Education
14 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138

Email us with feedback, questions, or to learn more:
CollegeAdmissions@MakingCaringCommon.org

www.makingcaringcommon.org

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