

Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission

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The following are real questions from college and universities' applications. They prompt applicants to reflect on their character, values, non-academic skills, and experiences, with many questions encouraging applicants to think through how they might create healthy, inclusive communities for everyone. When creating or choosing essay questions as a staff, consider the specific skills and experiences each question might help you measure (e.g., Is this question likely to tell us about performance character such as grit or diligence; ethical character such as care for others; or does it tell something else?). Supporting text or question interpretation guidance (follow-up questions, additional information about the wide-range of ways that students might choose to answer this question, general pointers, etc.) can be very helpful to include, particularly for students with limited access to school counselors or guidance about the application process.

Coalition for College 2019-2020

- Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
- Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
- Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
- What is the hardest part of being a student now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (Assuming they would listen to you)?

Source <http://www.coalitionforcollegeaccess.org/essays.html>

Colgate University

At Colgate, we believe that a diverse community is a strong community. Reflect on an experience that demonstrates your commitment to inclusion and diversity.

Diversity applies to many facets of who we are, including: cultural heritage, ethnic background, gender, socioeconomic upbringing, or an intersectional combination of all of the above. No matter who you are, you bring something to the table, and admissions wants to know about how you encourage others to participate in the conversation. Diversity and inclusion are about metaphorically holding the door open for someone else to enter, making room for another seat at the table (spoiler alert: there's plenty of room), amplifying the voice of someone who may not have otherwise been heard. Reflect on your activities and community and share an experience in which you made sure a group, activity, or event was not homogenous.

Source <https://www.colgate.edu/admission-aid/apply/regular-decision>

Common Application 2019-2020

- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

Source <https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2019-2020-common-app-essay-prompts>

Dartmouth College

- The Hawaiian word mo'olelo is often translated as “story” but it can also refer to history, legend, genealogy, and tradition. Use one of these translations to introduce yourself.
- In the aftermath of World War II, Dartmouth President John Sloane Dickey, Class of 1929, proclaimed, “The world’s troubles are your troubles...and there is nothing wrong with the world that better human beings cannot fix.” Which of the world’s “troubles” inspires you to act? How might your course of study at Dartmouth prepare you to address it?
- In *The Painted Drum*, author Louise Erdrich ‘76 wrote, “... what is beautiful that I make? What is elegant? What feeds the world?” Tell us about something beautiful you have made or hope to make.
- “Yes, books are dangerous,” young people’s novelist Pete Hautman proclaimed. “They should be dangerous—they contain ideas.” What book or story captured your imagination through the ideas it revealed to you? Share how those ideas influenced you.
- “I have no special talent,” Albert Einstein once observed. “I am only passionately curious.” Celebrate your curiosity.
- Labor leader Dolores Huerta is a civil rights activist who co-founded the organization now known as United Farm Workers. She said, “We criticize and separate ourselves from the process. We've got to jump right in there with both feet.” Speak your truth: Talk about a time when your passion became action.

Source <https://admissions.dartmouth.edu/glossary-term/writing-supplement>

In her best-selling novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, TCU alumna Sue Monk Kidd wrote, “The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.” What matters to you?

Examples of Essay Questions | Texas Christian University

Harvard College

- The Harvard College Honor Code declares that we “hold honesty as the foundation of our community.” As you consider entering this community that is committed to honesty, please reflect on a time when you or someone you observed had to make a choice about whether to act with integrity and honesty.
- The mission of Harvard College is to educate our students to be citizens and citizen-leaders for society. What would you do to contribute to the lives of your classmates in advancing this mission?

Source https://college.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2019-07/harvard_fy_supplement_2019-2020_website.pdf

Marquette College

- If we hosted "show and tell" during freshman orientation, what object would you choose to represent yourself to your new, 2,000 classmates?
- Think about your current friendships. Which one is most surprising to you, and why?
- Marquette is named after French explorer Jacques Marquette, but we know that exploration takes all forms. Tell us about a time you explored. What did you learn about yourself?

Source <https://www.marquette.edu/explore/application-essay-questions.php>

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- At MIT, we bring people together to better the lives of others. MIT students work to improve their communities in different ways, from tackling the world’s biggest challenges to being a good friend. Describe one way in which you have contributed to your community, whether in your family, the classroom, your neighborhood, etc.
- Tell us about the most significant challenge you’ve faced or something important that didn’t go according to plan. How did you manage the situation?

Source <https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/our-2019-20-application-essay-questions/>

Providence College

- “We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject, for both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in finding it.” -St. Thomas Aquinas, Dominican Philosopher. Providence College students have always engaged in lively intellectual debates through disputatio—the art of disputed questions. At Providence, there is often not one correct answer, but rather many answers that come together to form one truth. In a divided society filled with strong opinions, how do you work to ensure all viewpoints are considered and the ultimate truth is discovered?
- As Providence College educates future scholars and leaders, it continuously strives to form a community that reflects the rich diversity of the human family. Please highlight a specific example throughout your time in high school that has strengthened and promoted the flourishing of all and explain how you will use this experience to make an impact on the Providence College community.

Source <https://admission.providence.edu/apply/review-process/#essay>

Texas Christian University

- At TCU, our mission statement is very important to us. “To educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.” This is integrated into all aspects of the TCU experience. If you were to write a mission statement about your life, what would it be and how does this mission direct your life and goals?
- Tell us about the most significant person, experience, or circumstance which has shaped your life thus far. How has he, she, or it influenced your character? How might you use what you have learned to achieve your goals?
- Those we call great will usually point to some failure in their lives as a pivotal moment leading them to their successful path. Tell us about a time in your life in which failure propelled you toward success.
- In her best-selling novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, TCU alumna Sue Monk Kidd wrote, “The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.” What matters to you?

Source <https://admissions.tcu.edu/apply/freshman/index.php>

University of Rochester

The University of Rochester benefactor, entrepreneur, photography pioneer and philanthropist George Eastman said, “The progress of the world depends almost entirely upon education.” With that statement in mind, how will you use your University of Rochester experience to foster positive change in order to make the world, your community and those around you “ever better?”

Source <https://admission.providence.edu/apply/review-process/#essay>

University of California

Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or taking the lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about what you accomplished and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?

Did you lead a team? How did your experience change your perspective on leading others? Did you help to resolve an important dispute at your school, church, in your community or an organization? And your leadership role doesn't necessarily have to be limited to school activities. For example, do you help out or take care of your family?

Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Things to consider: What does creativity mean to you? Do you have a creative skill that is important to you? What have you been able to do with that skill? If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution? What are the steps you took to solve the problem?

How does your creativity influence your decisions inside or outside the classroom? Does your creativity relate to your major or a future career?

What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

Things to consider: If there's a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about it, feel free to do so). Why is this

talent or skill meaningful to you?

Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent? Does your talent or skill allow you opportunities in or outside the classroom? If so, what are they and how do they fit into your schedule?

Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

Things to consider: An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college. For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major, or taking advanced courses that interest you—just to name a few.

If you choose to write about educational barriers you've faced, how did you overcome or strive to overcome them? What personal characteristics or skills did you call on to overcome this challenge? How did overcoming this barrier help shape who are you today?

Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

Things to consider: A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?

If you're currently working your way through a challenge, what are you doing now, and does that affect different aspects of your life? For example, ask yourself, "How has my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends or with my family?"

Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

Things to consider: Many students have a passion for one specific academic subject area, something that they just can't get enough of. If that applies to you, what have you done to further that interest? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom—such as volunteer work, internships, employment, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or clubs—and what you have gained from your involvement.

Has your interest in the subject influenced you in choosing a major and/or future career? Have you been able to pursue coursework at a higher level in this subject (honors, AP, IB, college or university work)? Are you inspired to pursue this subject further at UC, and how might you do that?

What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

Things to consider: Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place—like your high school, hometown or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?

Why were you inspired to act? What did you learn from your effort? How did your actions benefit others, the wider community or both? Did you work alone or with others to initiate change in your community?

Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

Things to consider: If there's anything you want us to know about you, but didn't find a question or place in the application to tell us, now's your chance. What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge or opportunity that you think will help us know you better?

From your point of view, what do you feel makes you an excellent choice for UC? Don't be afraid to brag a little.

Source <https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/personal-insight-questions.html>

In *The Painted Drum*, author Louise Erdrich '76 wrote, "... what is beautiful that I make? What is elegant? What feeds the world?" Tell us about something beautiful you have made or hope to make.

University of Virginia

(2019-2020): UVA students are charged with living honorably and upholding a community of trust. Give us an example of a community that is important to you and how you worked to strengthen that community.

(2018-2019): UVA students are charged with pushing the boundaries of knowledge to serve others and contribute to the common good. Give us an example of how you've used what you've learned to make a positive impact in another person's life.

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: <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview>

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