

General Tips

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This document offers concrete tips and basic principles for colleges interested in integrating and assessing student character and other non-cognitive skills and capacities as part of the admission process. These tips are based on surveys of college admission deans, our team's pilot work with five partner colleges, and dozens of formal and informal conversations with experts and admission leaders.

For more on the background of these tips and guide, why character assessment matters, the ways character assessment can be implemented in different types of colleges, and related character assessment challenges and opportunities, see our [Character Assessment in College Admission Overview](#).

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

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**.



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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/>

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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>

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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