

Ideas Worth Testing: Innovation in Character Assessment in College Admission

Character Assessment In College Admission | Summer 2020

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Ideas Worth Testing

For decades college admission offices have used roughly the same tools to size up the capacities of applicants—grades, standardized test scores, advanced courses, and extracurricular activities. They're familiar and entrenched. But there's also no question that each of them is flawed and a major source of inequity in the admission process. To be sure, as we've argued, all assessments of human potential are imperfect. But it's entirely possible to improve these assessments and to create more equitable, meaningful, and accurate assessment tools.

And the good news is that there are new promising assessment ideas and innovations that colleges are considering or piloting. Our hope is that these innovations—and other promising ideas—will be tested on a far wider scale and that college admission officers will share information about their successes and failures and engage in a continuous improvement process. The stakes for students and colleges are simply too high to continue to rely on assessments with significant, known flaws and inequities.

Below we identify what we view as the most promising ideas and innovations. Important as it is to explore these innovations, it's also vital to implement them carefully. In most cases, assessments used for the first time should not be a significant factor in admission decisions. Admissions offices can pilot assessments without stakes attached, examine the value of new information generated by the assessments, and track whether this new data predicts outcomes, such as freshman year grades. Admission offices should also examine potential downsides of these assessments, including biases.

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Idea 1: Students submit a portfolio of their work from different disciplines for review

Many college admission stakeholders have been advocating in recent years for assessing actual student work. The Learning Policy Institute, in collaboration with EducationCounsel and Education First, has formed the [Reimagining College Access initiative](#), which “supports the use of K–12 performance assessments, such as student portfolios and capstone projects, in higher education admissions, placement, and advising decisions.” In addition, the [Coalition for College](#) has a virtual “locker” where students can compile samples of their work throughout high school and choose whether or not to share this work with colleges.

Portfolios clearly have many advantages. They provide students who don’t perform well on traditional classroom measures, for example, another way of demonstrating their academic abilities and their character strengths such as creativity, curiosity, and diligence. But they also raise concerns. Do admission staff have the expertise to evaluate student work—a piece of art or a poem, say—fairly and effectively? How will a large state college flooded with 80,000 applications—where admission officers spend about eight minutes reviewing each application—meaningfully review portfolios?

There may be creative solutions to these problems. A small number of admission staff, for example, might focus solely on portfolios, be trained in evaluating them and share their assessments with other admission team members. Alternatively, faculty members might be recruited to assess student work samples from within their discipline. MIT has implemented this type of system. Or a third party with expert external reviewers could provide college admission offices with a brief description of submitted work and a standardized rating of a student’s portfolio.

Idea 2: Real life dilemmas and on-the-spot questions

Colleges could try assessing problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration skills by having students respond to real-life dilemmas and scenarios—the kind of assessments already used by some employers in the hiring process and in education research studies. Bowdoin College, for instance, recently added an optional video essay prompt that seeks to assess skills such as motivation and empathy. Applicants randomly receive one of hundreds of prompts and have a few minutes to respond to a question like, “What is something you’ve done for someone else lately?” Students might respond to ethical dilemmas or questions about what they find energizing, meaningful, or challenging. A growing number of colleges and universities, including Vanderbilt, Stanford, Middlebury, Duke, and UC Berkeley are using [InitialView](#), a service that conducts unscripted, live interviews led by experienced interviewers so that colleges might assess applicants’ high-level communication and soft skills. Done thoughtfully, these assessments both provide another important window into character strengths and are difficult to game, and thus are less likely to disadvantage students without the time or resources to prepare.

Idea 3: Changes in letters of recommendation

Colleges could expand required recommendation letters beyond those from teachers and counselors. Other recommenders could include peers, afterschool providers, sports coaches, religious leaders, or community adults who may have much more knowledge than teachers or counselors about applicants’ social, emotional, and ethical capacities. To avoid overloading admission officers with letters, a few of these recommenders might simply rank the applicant’s skills using a simple worksheet. One crucial advantage of multiple evaluators completing rankings is the possibility of convergence. If multiple

recommenders identify the same characteristic as a strength in a student, the chances are better that an applicant possesses that strength.

Because too often recommendations are inflated—students are, for example, rated highly on every characteristic—admission offices might also explore **forced choice** recommendations that require recommenders to identify characteristics that best describe an applicant. Recommenders might choose, for example, three characteristics from a list of eight. Colleges that use shared application platforms might work within those platforms and with other members to advocate for changes to letter of recommendation forms.

Idea 4: Improved student contextual data

As we discussed in the [introduction to this guide](#), and in the [Examples of Language that Articulate the Importance of Family Responsibilities in College Admission](#) document, equity demands attention to the context of students' lives, including the family responsibilities and stresses they bear. A student who receives B's and C's in school while supervising a younger sibling consistently after school, for example, is demonstrating both grit and considerable academic potential. Yet it's hard for a variety of reasons to assess these challenges—students may not want to report them and admission offices might not know how to interpret and factor in these responsibilities and challenges in the evaluation process.

It's crucial for admission offices to pilot and evaluate various forms of prompts that seek to gather this information. While the Common Application and the Coalition Application have added useful questions that encourage applicants to report challenges related to the pandemic, it remains unclear how forthcoming students will be. Various supplemental or alternative prompts that provide students with specific examples of family challenges may generate significant information. Applicants can also benefit from specific examples of how and where

in the application to report these challenges and responsibilities. Further, admission offices can pilot various ways of utilizing this information to assess character and academic performance. Colleges might standardize systems for adjusting students' GPAs, for example, in relation to the number of hours applicants have devoted to family responsibilities.

Idea 5: Piloting existing, carefully developed tools

Well-established tools exist for making admission decisions, like the [Character Snapshot](#) created by the Enrollment Management Association (which runs the SSAT exam for private schools). This assessment has been used to evaluate the character strengths of just under 50,000 young people applying to high schools since 2017. It provides condensed reports about character strengths based on responses to questions. Given its rigorous construction and demonstrated use with high school students, a version of the Character Snapshot might be piloted for use in college admission. The [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#), a group comprised of public and independent high schools, has developed a new transcript, already used by some colleges, that assesses mastery of knowledge and skills related to character development. This transcript might be used on a pilot basis by far more college admissions offices as an alternative or as a supplement to grades with a close eye on equity—it's important that students from schools with fewer resources that don't use this transcript are not disadvantaged in the admission process.

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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>

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