



# 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

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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 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 Deans Commitment Letter (see p. 22), 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. 20) 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 suggests 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 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?

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1. These guideposts are an abbreviated version of the guideposts for parents in the full report.

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## 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.

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## 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. It’s 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

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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>1</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>2</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 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

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1. These guideposts are an abbreviated version of the guideposts in the full report.  
2. A sample compact from Making Caring Common is forthcoming.

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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>1</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 range 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 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.

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## 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.

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1. 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>.



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