

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

Character Assessment In College Admission | Summer 2020

MAKING  
CARING  
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PROJECT



# 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. This work is important; research shows that student character and social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are highly predictive of college and life success. These skills are also commonly valued by college admission offices in reviewing applicants. Yet many colleges report having limited, unreliable data about these areas in making admission decisions. This document provides high schools with general information and promising strategies regarding character assessment practices.

With this document, we aim to provide high school administrators with a general overview of character assessment options, limitations, and resources as related to college admission. We will also give high schools a starting place for character assessment that will be useful to them and to colleges.

## Where to start

### Step 1: Read

Parents, students, and/or school staff can share this resource with their school administrators and encourage them to utilize it.

### Step 2: Designate

Identify who in the school will take on this work: A committee? An administrator?

### Step 3: Identify

Identify the sequence and scope of work. What idea or step can we do well this year? What can we work towards in the next several years?

### Step 4: Pilot

Invest in and try out one or more ideas or steps. Evaluate. Revise as needed. Repeat.

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## Introduction

This document offers new, potentially powerful ways to do the critical work of assessing student character in high schools. Research suggests that social and emotional learning (SEL) and character skills and capacities—including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, problem-solving skills, grit, curiosity, and respect for others—are closely associated with academic and career success. And yet, many parents and schools are not explicitly or adequately teaching, or even talking about, the importance of these skills. Equally concerning is the fact that many colleges are not consistently making admission decisions with character and SEL information in-hand or in-mind. While colleges can clearly do more to integrate character into their admission processes (see our **Character Assessment in College Admission: A Guide of Best Practices with Accompanying Resources**), many colleges report not having high-quality, reliable, practically useful data from students and high schools about key character and SEL skills. As educators, if we seek to change a college admission process that often harmfully prioritizes student achievement above all else, it's vital to ensure that colleges have available to them accurate and high-quality information about student character.

While well-researched tools to assess student character and SEL skills exist, most are not

developed with college admission in mind and are not likely to work well in this context (see call out boxes below about formative assessments and assessment challenges). Tools are needed that can effectively capture the contributions and skills of all students—including those demonstrating skills and capacities in quiet, everyday ways (not just those students already well known for character-related achievements or public displays of character). Tools must also capture information about students from diverse backgrounds and marginalized students for whom the admission process is not adequately capturing strengths, such as the student who takes care of a younger sibling every day after school or works 20 hours a week at a part-time job. Until such tools are well-tested, widely available, and universally implemented, high schools can draw on the following tips for providing better information about student character to colleges.

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# Project Background

As part of the Turning the Tide<sup>1</sup> initiative, Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, extensively researched tools and practices that high schools might use to assess and motivate character in students. Our goal was to learn more about what works in character assessment, and to identify, adapt, or build tools and questions that (1) would glean new information about students for use in the college admission process, and (2) would be useful and informative for high schools and students themselves. Over the course of many months, we reviewed a wide literature related to character development and assessment, consulted with experts, and reviewed existing assessment tools.

With the guidance of our project Advisory Board, our team identified and developed several promising ideas and questions and piloted them with over 1900 students in 12 schools across the country. Based on this pilot and conversations with many experts and practitioners, we produced the following list of promising character assessment practices for high schools.

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# Assessing and Motivating Character in Your School: General Tips

## Tip 1: Set the stage for skill development (early, regularly, and often!)

It's vital for schools not just to assess character but also to take steps to ensure that they are building a culture where key social, emotional, and ethical skills and capacities can flourish. Many resources exist that can guide your school in best practices for developing a positive school climate as well as key character and social and emotional skills and capacities in students and school staff. These include:

- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#))<sup>2</sup>
- [Character.org](#)<sup>3</sup>
- [Making Caring Common](#)<sup>4</sup>
- [National School Climate Center \(NSCC\)](#)<sup>5</sup>
- [Challenge Success](#)<sup>6</sup>
- [Character Lab](#)<sup>7</sup>

## Tip 2: Draw from research

When assessing character, draw from existing research and theory, where possible. While character and SEL skills can be tricky to assess (see call out boxes below about formative assessments and inherent assessment challenges), there are evidence-based tools available (see [here](#)<sup>8</sup> and [here](#)<sup>9</sup>). Utilize existing assessment tools and [research-based definitions](#),<sup>10</sup> wherever possible. Consider beginning by reviewing articles, such as these about [grit](#)<sup>11</sup> and [empathy](#),<sup>12</sup> that are based in research. Making Caring Common has also published a compendium of research-based definitions (see [Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission](#)).

## Tip 3: Be selective

When choosing skills to assess, pick a fairly small number of capacities and skills—perhaps 5–7—most important for your school and students. Involve diverse, representative school stakeholders (including educators, parents, and students) in conversations about which specific skills will be taught as well as why they were chosen and how they will be assessed. As conversation starters, consider the following questions:

- What is the mission of our school? What do we most want to teach students? What do we want graduates to know and to be able to do?
- What skills does research indicate are connected to outcomes that are important to us? Does research indicate, for example, that certain skills are connected to good relationships, academic success, strong citizenship, or productivity and integrity at work?
- How are we building those skills currently in students? In staff? Is what we're teaching effective for student and staff skill development? How do we know?
- How are we assessing these skills in students? How do we know these assessments are effective?

## Tip 4: Establish definitions and examples

Provide a clear definition and examples of each targeted skill and capacity for students and staff: What does it “look like” to have this skill in your school? Involve a diverse array of students and staff from all backgrounds when choosing skills and gathering examples, and aim to be as inclusive in exemplars as possible. Definitions and examples should appeal to people of all backgrounds. For

instance, many people look for examples of community service when evaluating students' compassion. However, compassion can be found just as readily when reviewing students' everyday interactions with peers (e.g., Is the student thoughtful and sympathetic in their interactions with others? Do they show kindness to everyone—including those that 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. Definitions and examples of compassion that only include community service would not be fair to or inclusive of all students.

## Tip 5: Resist the urge to collapse skills

If developing or utilizing new assessments in your school, resist the urge to merge capacities or skills together for assessment purposes (e.g., Do not provide one overall “character” or “SEL” score). Instead, clearly identify, define, and give supporting examples of each capacity or skill you wish staff to comment on (e.g., grit or empathy for others). Take care to distinguish between ethical character (e.g., skills and capacities including empathy, compassion etc.) and performance character (e.g., 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: Pilot. evaluate. revise. repeat

Whatever assessment you use, it's important to consider it a learning experience. After you've piloted a new system or tool, pause to review the data and consider what new information has been learned or gleaned. Also, collect feedback from students and staff about the tool or process. Topics to consider include:

- Is the data accurate? How do we know?
- Does the data provide us with valuable information? New information?
- Does the process and/or tool work well for all of our students? Does it capture the strengths of students from a wide variety of backgrounds? How do we know?
- If scores are assigned: Do we see associations between these scores and other data important to our school (e.g., grades, disciplinary referrals, counseling referrals, etc.)? What do we make of these associations?

If members of your school perceive that your assessment or process is not accurate or helpful in assessing skills for some or all students, consider revising and piloting again.

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# Note on Formative Assessments

There are many research-based formative assessments of SEL and character skills available to schools. Formative assessments, often completed at the end of a unit or period of learning, can help students and staff identify students' strengths, growth areas, and opportunities for development. For example, assessments may reveal that a student has grown in their teamwork skills but could still benefit from additional support or training to build their resilience. While formative assessments can be highly valuable to students, parents, and educators, they were not designed for high stakes decision-making contexts, such as college admission. More research is needed to better understand the accuracy and utility of these measures in such contexts.

If you currently use formative character assessments in your school, this data may still inform some aspects of the college admission process. Consider using this data to:

1. **Inform letters of recommendation:** Help teachers or administrators form a better understanding of students' character-related strengths and skills, which may serve as a foundation for thoughtful, holistic letters of recommendation.
2. **Inspire or inform student essays:** Encourage students to reflect on their character strengths and growth opportunities in their college application essays.

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# Sharing Information about Character with College Admission Offices

Try these tips for expanding and improving the quality of information shared with colleges about students' character.

## Improve letters of recommendation

Provide all school staff with examples and templates of high-quality letters of recommendation that focus on more than just students' achievements (see **Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers**). These letters can focus on what makes each student truly unique, as well as their character. Encourage school staff to provide concrete, illustrative examples of student behavior in recommendations.

- **Get to know your students personally:** If staff feel that they need more information to write very personalized letters of recommendation focused on students' character, provide them with opportunities to glean this information. Ask students to complete simple prompts about their character/skills/experiences and what they prioritize (e.g., "What is your life's 'mission statement?'" or "What would you want written on your tombstone about yourself?"). Additional activities that facilitate staff learning more about students' goals, strengths, and commitment to others can be found [here](#).<sup>13</sup>
- **Consult with other adults:** Teachers seeking more information about a student might also be given time to consult with other teachers, sport coaches, advisors, etc. who know the student in other settings. Parent questionnaires and/or feedback from other influential community-based adults (e.g., workplace supervisors, religious leaders, etc.) can also deepen staffs' understanding of a student and help them provide a fuller, more helpful recommendation.

## Help students prepare character-focused college essay responses

College essay questions commonly prompt students to consider who they are as a person and what they have contributed to others. Questions like, "How have you served others in your community?" and "Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve," may serve as valuable opportunities for students to reflect upon and share their character with colleges (note that many [Turning the Tide](#)<sup>1</sup> endorsers, as well as the Common Application and Coalition Application, have adopted similar questions for applicants).

## Report the unreported

Ask students to describe their priorities by outlining with you (and for colleges!) how they spend their time on a day-to-day basis. Help students identify aspects of their lives that typically go under-reported on college applications and are important to colleges, including time spent supporting their family (e.g., working to contribute to the family income or taking care of a family member), which may speak to their diligence, resilience, and/or compassion.

## Add character to report cards

Consider adding character or SEL skills to students' report cards, which will be shared with parents and—potentially—colleges. For example, teachers might select or rank students' top three character strengths from a list of dropdowns and provide a short



example of how that skill presents in the classroom. Alternatively, teachers might rate key skills or capacities (e.g., diligence, concern for others) that are important to the school for each student. Teachers might comment not just on the strength of a skill but also on the growth of the skill over time. When students aren't demonstrating important skills, it's important for teachers to suggest what a student might do to develop that skill. Those writing recommendations might look at assigned "scores" across classrooms to consider where convergences and differences in skills and capacities are noted. Convergence may increase the odds that raters are accurately describing whether a student has developed a particular skill.

Consider uniting with other organizations attempting to do aligned reform around transcript reporting, such as the [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#),<sup>14</sup> which is a network of high schools that utilize a new digital transcript, and [Reimagining College Access](#),<sup>15</sup> an initiative that supports the use of K–12 performance assessments, such as student portfolios and capstone projects, in admission.

Encourage students to reflect on their character strengths and growth opportunities in their college application essays.

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# Character Assessments in Schools: Exploring New Possibilities

The following is a list of promising, new strategies for collecting information about student character:

School-wide participation and investment in **student nominations systems** that identify exemplary character or SEL skills and send students powerful signals about the skills and capacities that your school highly values. Using such systems, students and teachers may select students that, for example, demonstrate compassion consistently and/or in extraordinary ways. Nominated students might be celebrated by the school and this information might be shared with colleges.

- In order to avoid nominations becoming a popularity contest, consider asking students to nominate peers at unscheduled, random times so that students can't campaign for nominations. Ask students to nominate more than one student, including a student who is not their friend. Ask students to consider questions that are less likely to lead them to just pick their good friends (e.g., "Who has been most helpful in your class on group projects?")
- Ask students to report on specific behaviors they've observed vs. who has skills/attributes more generally. In practice, this is the difference between asking "Who is kind?" and "Who has done a kind act towards someone he/she doesn't know well in the past month?"
- Form a committee comprised of teachers and/or other school staff (e.g., sport coaches, cafeteria workers, etc.) to review and provide input on nomination data. This committee might also identify students for consideration that members have observed demonstrating key skills or capacities, but that student peers may not know or think to identify.

- As much as possible, attempt to cross-compare nominations across groups. For example, compare students' nominations to teacher nominations or even students' self-assessments—looking for where there is convergence and where there are differences. Convergence, as we've noted, may suggest greater accuracy, and you can use differences as the basis for conversations and learning.

Consider school or grade-level participation (or individual student participation) in **existing and validated summative character assessments** that can be used for both admission and reflection purposes, such as the Enrollment Management Association's [Character Snapshot](#) tool.<sup>16</sup> The Snapshot, which provides a quick view at students' character strengths at one point in time, is currently used in independent school admission and has been rigorously evaluated to ensure reliability and validity with high-school-age students.

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# Note on Common Character Assessment Challenges and Ideas with Potential

Many existing measures of SEL and character skills weren't designed with college admission or other high-stakes contexts in mind. The most common forms of character assessments, those that rely on self-reports or teacher reports, are often susceptible to biases. There is also potential for students (and even educators!) to inflate or change their responses so as to make the student appear more "desirable" in the admission process.

Despite these challenges, there are many tools and question types with potential for success in high-stakes contexts. These include forced-choice items, which ask respondents to pick between several mutually appealing responses, and situational judgement tasks, where respondents choose an appropriate response to a hypothetical problem or challenge. Additionally, assessments that rely on perceptions from multiple sources (such as nominations by large, diverse groups, including peers and educators), and recommendations that require forced ranking of applicants' top strengths, may have potential. Finally, assessments that require personal data that can be verified (verifiable biodata), such as the number of volunteer hours a student has completed in the past year or a quantified tally of how the student spent his/her free hours, may hold promise in high-stakes admission contexts.



Provide all school staff with examples and templates of high-quality letters of recommendation that focus on more than just students' achievements.

Character Assessment in High Schools

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# Self-Reflective Questions for Schools to Consider

## Pre-work: Building structures and support

- How are we showing staff and students that SEL and character matters in our school? How do we convey that it matters? How effective are our efforts? What else might we do?
  - How are we providing opportunities for deep, meaningful relationship-building between students and between students and staff? How do we know this is working?
  - How are we growing SEL and character skills among students and staff? What programs or activities do we implement? How do we know they are working?
  - How do we respond when we see students exhibiting behaviors aligned with our goals? How do we honor student character contributions?
  - How do we respond when we see students exhibiting behaviors that are unacceptable? What do we do? What messages do our responses send to students?
- How are we using the data we collect? Are we talking about results and using these conversations as an opportunity for both student growth and our own growth as educators? Are we sharing data with parents or colleges? Why or why not?
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the assessments we're using? Do they work for our students, staff, and school? What isn't working? What might we change?

## College admission preparation

- Are we providing teachers with examples and training so they might be successful in conveying student character and skills as part of the college admission process? What are we providing to them? What other forms of support might we provide?
- Are we providing students with guidance in writing about their character and skills in the college admission process? What opportunities are we providing? What else might we do to provide support?

## Considering character assessment

- What skills and traits are most important to develop in our students? Why are these important to us? How did we pick them? Who picked them?
- How are we defining the skills and capacities most important to us? Does our definition come from research? How can we make it more inclusive of people from all backgrounds?
- What tools are we using to assess those skills and traits? Are they from a reputable source? How do we know they are effective assessments?





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1. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>
  2. <https://casel.org/guide/>
  3. <http://character.org/>
  4. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/research-initiatives/caring-schools-network>
  5. <https://www.schoolclimate.org/>
  6. <http://www.challengesuccess.org/schools/school-program/>
  7. <https://characterlab.org/>
  8. <https://www.csai-online.org/collection/2799>
  9. <https://www.transformingeducation.org/sel-assessment>
  10. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
  11. <https://angeladuckworth.com/qa/>
  12. <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/empathy/definition>
  13. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators>
  14. <https://mastery.org/>
  15. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access>
  16. <https://ssat.org/snapshot>

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>

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](mailto:CollegeAdmissions@MakingCaringCommon.org)

[www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org)

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