Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders

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Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders

Recommendation forms, when crafted carefully and used thoughtfully by admission staff, can be crucial tools for understanding applicants' strengths and challenges. Yet too often recommendations are inflated, inaccurate, platitudinous, or vague, and too often recommendation systems are structured in ways that exacerbate inequities.

The following is a list of ideas for improving the impact of recommendation letters and forms for institutions that utilize their own applications, and for those that use shared application platforms. As relatively novel ideas, these suggestions need further exploration, piloting, and evaluation.

If you have your own institution-specific application

Ask explicitly for recommenders to describe concretely, and offer examples of applicants' character skills and life experiences in letters of recommendation—especially those that are important to your institution and will be considered in admission decisions. You might provide some examples of the types of information and comments that are useful to your institution and readers (see our tips in **Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers**).

Consider a pilot in which you ask recommenders to identify 1-3 skills or attributes that most describe an applicant. You might provide a dropdown list of 8-10 skills or attributes and ask recommenders to choose 1-3 among them. Forcing recommenders to make these choices prevents them from inflating every aspect of an applicant's character. You might also ask recommenders to identify 1-3 traits that are least like an applicant. Ask the recommender to briefly explain why they chose these skills or attributes as representative or not representative of the applicant (see example below). Look for convergence between these assigned traits and other aspects of the applicants' character presented in the application.

Consider a pilot in which you ask students to self-identify 1-3 character traits that are most and least like them (see example below). Look for convergence between these self-identified traits and aspects of the applicants' character presented in the application and in letters of recommendation. Greater convergence may signal greater accuracy.

For use in any application platform

Even if you're using a shared application platform and are unable to dictate or customize the content of your recommendation forms, in application instructions specific to your institution (perhaps on your admission website), advise applicants that you will be looking for evidence of their character in letters of recommendation. This sends a clear message to applicants and recommendation writers about what is important to your institution and can help drive recommendation letter content. You might also highlight aspects of the letter most important to your institution (see our tips in **Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers**).

Wherever possible, look for convergence between what recommenders say about applicant character and what is revealed about character in other aspects of the application (e.g., Does the student's character described in the recommendation letter seem consistent with what is shared in the essay? With the description of activities and extracurricular involvement?). Look also at the convergence and differences in character descriptions between different recommendation letter writers. More convergence may signal more accuracy.

As opportunities arise, work with major application platforms on recommendation form revisions and piloting. Both the Common Application[1] and Coalition Application[2] have expressed openness to revisions of the current recommendation form and will seek input from member institutions. Recommendation forms that rely on forced-choice rankings may have promise (see example below).

Work with other aligned organizations and projects (Mastery Transcript Consortium,[3] Character Collaborative,[4] Making Caring Common,[5] *Turning the Tide*,[6] Reimagining College Access,[7] etc.) to discuss and pilot new ways of sharing information about students' skills and experiences.

Advise applicants that you will be looking for evidence of their character in letters of recommendation. This sends a clear message to applicants and recommendation writers about what is important to your institution and can help drive recommendation letter content.

Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms

Example A: Student self-identification question on application form (for piloting)

The following is an example only—we recommend admission leaders choose question language and skills based on their institutional values when piloting.

The following skills/attributes are all important to our community. Please choose three skills or attributes from the list below that you think best describe you.

Tell us briefly why you think each skill/attribute describes you and how you demonstrate it.

This question has no right or wrong answers—this is an opportunity for us to get to know you better. Specific answers/examples that reveal aspects of who you are can be very helpful.

Concern for community *(community may include family, friends, school, or broader community)*

Curiosity

Integrity

Kindness

Intellectual promise

Academic motivation

Empathy

Creative thought

Leadership

Steadiness

Patience

Attribute 1: ___
How do you exemplify this attribute (try to be as specific as possible): Word limit 200 words

Attribute 2: ___
How do you exemplify this attribute (try to be as specific as possible):

Attribute 3: ___
How do you exemplify this attribute (try to be as specific as possible):

Example B: Forced-choice character question for recommendation writers (for piloting)

The following is an example only—we recommend admission leaders choose question language and skills based on their institutional values when piloting.

Which of the following character strengths are most like (the applicant)? Rank from 1 to 6 with 1 being "most like the applicant" and 6 being "least like the applicant."

Caring 4

Curious 3

Motivation 1

Resilient 2

Academic Achievement 5

Creativity 6

Example C: Open-ended question for recommendation writers (for piloting)

The following is an example only—we recommend admission leaders choose question language and skills based on their institutional values when piloting.

Which of the following character strengths are most like (the applicant)? Choose two.

Concern for community (community may include family, friends, school, or broader community)

Curiosity

Integrity

Kindness

Intellectual promise

Academic motivation

Empathy

Creative thought

Leadership

Steadiness

Patience

Attribute 1: ___
In what ways does the applicant exemplify this attribute?

Attribute 2: ___
In what ways does the applicant exemplify this attribute?

1. https://www.commonapp.org/
2. https://www.coalitionforcollegeaccess.org/
3. https://mastery.org/
4. https://character-admission.org/
5. https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/
6. https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions
7. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access