

# How to Start

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Assessing character and non-cognitive skills and capacities is complex, and admission offices have many competing priorities. Confused as to where to start? The list below offers a few ideas.

## 1. Clearly signal your values to applicants

After identifying your values as an institution and the skills and experiences that you seek in applicants (see **Character Assessment Readiness: An Audit Tool for College Admission Offices**), ensure that this information is shared internally, and then consistently and publicly with applicants, educators, parents, and other stakeholders. By explicitly and consistently telling applicants in marketing and application materials about your institution's values—and, importantly, how these values are connected to the skills and experiences that you seek in applicants—you are more likely to recruit applicants that have those values and skills. At the same time, you will be sending young people strong messages that colleges—and by extension, society—value more than just their achievements. Publicize the values you share and the character skills you seek in applicants on your website, in marketing materials, in school presentations, and especially in the application and application instructions. Get applicants excited and talking about what matters most to you! (See **Sharing Institutional Values: Examples from College Admission Websites** for examples.)

## 2. Check to see that application “inputs” align with your values

As much as possible, make sure that the skills and values that are important to your institution are aligned with the questions that you ask in your application. For example, if your institution prioritizes care for others in applicants, consider asking an essay question about how students have given back to their respective communities. Similarly, if you

have the ability to modify letters of recommendation forms, consider asking recommenders to comment specifically on an applicant's commitment to others. Not only will you have more information about the skills and values you care about in applicants, you'll also be signaling to applicants and/or recommenders that you “walk the walk” in terms of prioritizing values and character skills in admission. (See **Examples of Character-Focused Essay Questions in College Admission.**)

## 3. Conduct institutional research about student success and failure

A Thrivers Study is one way to research which students are thriving at your institution and what skills, experiences, or behaviors tend to make them successful there. This information can be helpful in admission, where readers can focus on the recruitment, identification, and admission of these students. While there are many ways to complete a Thrivers Study, most studies involve asking key stakeholders (students, faculty, and administration) about the skills and qualities most present in successful students. (See **The Thrivers Study: A Tool for Understanding the Characteristics of Successful Students.**) You may also choose to learn more about students who have not been successful at your institution; this can reveal how these students might be better identified and supported in the future.

## 4. Build support for character assessment in admission with key stakeholders

Character assessment in admission does not happen in a vacuum. In places where the best work in

character assessment occurs, it is most often with the support of the institutions' faculty, president, board, and other senior leaders. By focusing on why character assessment in admission matters (see [“Why Character Matters in College Admission” Presentation Template](#)), the specific skills you will seek in applicants, and the connection between those skills and values/goals important to the institution, you will begin to make a powerful case.

## 1. Advocate for changes in letters of recommendation

If you use your own institution-specific application, consider asking recommendation writers to comment on particular character skills and experiences important to your institution and to provide supporting examples. You may consider implementing forced-choice responses that require recommenders to identify top character skills for each applicant (instead of allowing recommenders to suggest the applicant is highly skilled or experienced in all areas). If you use application platforms such as the Common Application or Coalition Application, consider working with these platforms to explore and research new recommendation prompts. Finally, share with high school educators and recommenders examples of the types of information important in your consideration of character (see [Writing Character-Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers](#)). Additional ideas about recommendation form changes can be found in [Exploring Character through Recommendation Forms: New Ideas for College Admission Leaders](#).

## 2. Ask explicitly about family contributions

Family contributions constitute a large portion of many applicants' out-of-school time and can speak to the applicants' character, including their perseverance, grit, and compassion/empathy. While most admission offices report that applicants' significant family contributions (including taking care of a family member after school or working to support

the family income) are important, applicants are often hesitant to report this sensitive information (or they don't know that these family contributions are highly valued by colleges). By stating explicitly in application instructions that substantial family commitments are valued, and by giving applicants a specific place to list these contributions, colleges can set the record straight. See [Examples of Language that Articulate the Importance of Family Responsibilities in College Admission](#) for inspiration.

## 3. Endorse the deans commitment letter

The deans commitment letter (see [Deans Commitment Letter](#)), which was created by Making Caring Common in collaboration with *Turning the Tide* endorsers, seeks to clear up misconceptions about what admission offices value in applicants and to affirm the value of high school educators, parents, and students in shaping high school curricular and related academic decisions. Over 140 *Turning the Tide* endorsers have already signed on in support of this letter.

## 4. Unite with and support reform-based organizations

Consider collaborating with other groups that are focused on character assessment and related reform efforts, including Making Caring Common, authors of [Turning the Tide](#);<sup>1</sup> the [Character Collaborative](#),<sup>2</sup> which seeks to “change admission practice at the higher and secondary education levels to reflect the significance of character strengths in attaining success in school, college, and work”; and [The Mastery Transcript Consortium](#),<sup>3</sup> which explores how new transcript models can better reflect students' experiences, skills, and strengths. [The Reimagining College Access](#) team at the Learning Policy Institute (in collaboration with EducationCounsel and Education First) is also working to support the use of K-12 performance assessments in higher education.<sup>4</sup>



1. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>
2. <https://character-admission.org/>
3. <https://mastery.org/>
4. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access>

Last reviewed September 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>

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