





OVERDUE REVOLUTION:

Character Strengths in the Admission Equation



By David Holmes

Recent research and the wisdom of experience demonstrate powerfully that a critical missing element in the college admission process is a procedure to incorporate character strengths as a measure of potential success.

Despite the fact that a growing number of stakeholders believe the admission system needs to be altered to capture traits like perseverance, honesty, and grit, there is a chasm between the right thing to do and the ability to make it happen. Bridging the chasm, however, will require a fundamental change of thinking and the willingness to try something new.

TESTING: EVOLUTION OF AN AMERICAN TRADITION

The roots of systematic testing for intelligence and academic promise run deep in America. The practice derives from a laudatory goal, a goal that extends back to the time of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson despised the idea that America's leadership class would derive from hereditary privilege and wealth. Rather, he argued, we should seek a "natural aristocracy among men" based on "virtue and talents."

During and after World War II, there was a renewed commitment to realize both the American dream of equal opportunity and to seek out the best talent available, regardless of family origin or economic station. Standardized testing emerged as an important vehicle in finding the brightest Americans for jobs during the war and, later, an avenue for determining who should be admitted to America's best colleges. Along with grade point average, the college admission process turned to the SAT, augmented later by the ACT.

Looking across history, however, there is another line of thought shaping how we assess merit. From the prescription of Benjamin Franklin about right behavior, to our recent focus on helping young people succeed in the modern age, leaders from many fields have argued that traits of character are critical to success in college, work, and life.

To these observers, experience and life stories suggest that these strengths of character (e.g., perseverance, hard work, honesty, grit, optimism, prudent risk-taking) are crucial ingredients in success and life satisfaction. Moreover, for many, experience suggests that character strengths are *more* important than anything else, including qualities such as IQ or academic aptitude.

GROWING RESEARCH BASE

There is a growing body of research that validates the idea that the non-cognitive domain, including character traits, is a legitimate avenue of inquiry and intervention.

The work of Howard Gardner, a Harvard University (MA) developmental psychologist, opened the door to thinking more broadly about intelligence, testing, and the elements that foster success in school and beyond.

Gardner's research identifies "multiple intelligences" to explain the range of human cognition. He points out that SATs, which measure linguistic and mathematical ability, ignore other critical forms of intelligence. "Such tests are biased against individuals who do not exhibit that blend of intelligences, those whose strengths show up better in sustained projects or when they are examined *in situ*," Gardner as observed (1993).

Nobel Prize-winning economist, James Heckman, and his colleagues have described the limitations of various achievement tests, especially their neglect of important non-cognitive factors.

Heckman's team reported that "Achievement tests do not adequately capture *character skills*, such as conscientiousness, perseverance, sociability, and curiosity, which are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains. . . . However, in recent research, economists and psychologists have constructed measures of these skills and provide evidence that they are stable across situations and predict meaningful life outcomes. . . . A growing body of empirical research shows that character skills rival IQ in predicting educational attainment, labor market success, health, and criminality" (2013).

Other research reinforces Heckman's conclusion:

- The experience of KIPP charter schools indicates that students with a stronger academic profile (including higher SAT scores), but lacking in specific character traits, were more likely to drop out (2012).
- Several studies have focused on the differential effects of GPA and SAT scores on educational success. Specifically, researchers have found that college grades are correlated more strongly with GPA than with standardized test scores.
- Studies by the University of Pennsylvania's Angela Duckworth and others have found that GPA and college persistence are correlated strongly with character traits, such as self-control and perseverance.

The work of Duckworth is particularly promising. A recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, she has joined with other researchers and a national cohort of schools to develop valid, reliable measures of character strengths. The group is seeking to discern the impact of specific character strengths on important outcomes and to develop interventions to promote personal development, such a report card showing a student's character growth. An important assumption is that character strengths are relatively stable over time and situation but malleable to experience and intervention.

Duckworth's research framework includes survey questions that address core character strengths, such as self-control, optimism, social intelligence, gratitude, zest, curiosity, and grit. In a Duckworth study reported in July 2014, students with a higher composite grit score get better grades, are more likely to enroll in college, and are more likely to stay in college.

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If the research by Duckworth and her colleagues is successful, their work will provide an avenue for measuring character strengths in a valid and reliable way. It could also offer strategies for altering college admission to incorporate these factors.

REVAMPING THE ADMISSION SYSTEM

Although the evidence suggests that character is crucial to success in college and beyond, the elevation of character strengths in making admission decision faces two significant obstacles.

- The practical side of reviewing thousands of applicants remains a challenge. Colleges, especially those attracting large numbers of applicants, need time-efficient ways to review their applicants, and SAT scores and GPA are a useful first-order sorting mechanism. Delving more deeply and more systematically into candidate characteristics requires more time and staff.
- Admission offices need valid and reliable measures of character strengths. This is a nascent area of development with serious limitations. The validity of student self-reports is a primary concern.

On the validity issue, Rich Roberts, a research scientist at the Educational Testing Service, has studied “fake-ability” in self-assessment and is pessimistic about using self-reports in college admission. Norma Wing, an expert on data mining and assessing employment candidates, points out, “Self-reports can work for low stakes assessment, but are very problematic for high stakes situations.”

Thus, we have a serious dilemma. We believe that character strengths are a crucial, perhaps the most crucial, factor in educational and vocational success. Yet, the college admission system is resistant to change, especially to an untested or risky endeavor.

Recent revisions to the SAT, although a useful step, do not go far enough. Leon Botstein at Bard College in New York disparages the SAT altogether as a relevant indicator of promise and says that it “needs to be abandoned and replaced” (2014). However, this action is unlikely.

Recognizing all these factors, the most feasible solution is to focus reform on elevating character strengths to equal footing with other criteria, such as SAT scores. Fortunately, inducing change has emerged as a realistic possibility. Several college presidents and admission staff I interviewed, including those at selective colleges, appear open to new approaches and ready to engage in collective dialogue about how to get started.

- The presidents of two colleges in the Pioneer League, each with a strong engineering focus, said they recognize the importance of character traits, such as creativity and perseverance. They would like to assess candidates for such qualities, but do not want to put their institutions at a competitive disadvantage. Hence, they are open to joining with other colleges to broaden the criteria for assessing applicants.
- Admission staff members at two Ivy League colleges related stories of promising candidates from atypical backgrounds. One young man from eastern Idaho, attending small rural high school, had built a business raising sheep. Another student, a Native American who had academic gaps, had demonstrated perseverance and effort to achieve a high



school diploma. Yet another student, a young woman from an inner city high school, had “lifted off” academically late in her high school career, but had ambition, leadership qualities, and a sharp intelligence. Sitting at the table with other admission staff who held files with more impressive “traditional” accomplishments, these admission officers said they made cases for admitting these students,

- The president of a selective liberal arts college asked his admission staff to look for students with jobs or internships that demonstrate clarity of purpose, practical skills, and ingenuity. He also urged faculty to encourage and provide credit for internships over the course of their college career. Thus far, he has been frustrated by his inability to alter the thinking of his colleagues.

These anecdotes indicate a growing interest in recognizing different attributes in reviewing candidates for admission.

PATHWAYS TO REFORM

With the aim of revamping the college admission process, here are four interrelated strategies (and one outlier) to incorporate character strengths in college admission.

DEVELOP A VALID STUDENT SURVEY

It is essential that the research of Duckworth and others goes forward and, indeed, expands in scope. Specifically, researchers, working in concert with the Educational Testing Service (ETS), must develop a stand-alone instrument for assessing character strengths. The tool must have an acceptable level of validity and reliability, be rich in insight, and be useful in comparing candidates.

Just as crucial is for ETS to establish this instrument as one of the key measures. Including the survey as a required part of the ETS “package” would be a convenient and influential approach.

As such, students would be asked to give behavioral evidence of specific character strengths as part of the college admission testing and application process.

TAP TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO VALIDATE DATA

First, two teachers, probably those asked to write recommendations, would *complete a short survey* rating the applicants. The survey would be similar to the student survey described above.

In a 2013–2014 study of middle students in a national sample of schools, teachers rated each student. The eight survey items provided a useful glimpse at any discrepancies between the student survey and the teacher survey. In most cases, this was a valuable confirmation of the student self-reports. Where there were discrepancies on particular items, this provided useful information too.

Second, the same two teachers would complete the *standard teacher recommendation form*, now with required commentary on character strengths.

Third, students would be asked to give *narrative evidence* of specific character strengths. Utilizing a standard format aligned with the research on character traits, this would be a required part of the college application.

The teacher survey and the teacher recommendations can be implemented with a minimum of effort into the materials required by the college. For the teacher survey, the college could ask the teacher to access the college’s website and to submit the survey electronically. This would provide a convenient avenue for collating and integrating data from the two teachers. Likewise, faculty and student commentary on character strengths is easily inserted into college application and rated by a research-based algorithm. The sum impact of these three sources of information will be rich data that reinforces (or contradicts) the scores on the student self-report survey.

CREATE A MORE COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT FORMULA

Through the revamped application system, a student’s overall application package would include: 1) a student survey on character strengths offered as a required part of sitting for the SAT; 2) a survey instrument for teachers to assess student character strengths on specific items; 3) a teacher recommendation form with a section addressing character strengths; 4) evidence provided by the student in narrative form.

A college admission office could develop a composite score of character strengths, with each of these components weighted according to what research indicates about the relative importance of each input.

Ideally, the composite character score for each student would be on the standard 800-point scale, mirroring the SAT. Thus, an admission committee would have three composite scores to use in making their decision. For example, a candidate could have scores of 680 in verbal, 610 in math, and 700 in character strengths.

Of course, a college might choose to weight Character Strengths even more highly, perhaps equal to a combined Verbal/Math score. In either case, this new approach would fundamentally change the evaluation context for college applicants.

INTRODUCE SMALL-SCALE EXPERIMENTS

Recognizing that a paradigm shift is unlikely to occur all at once and across the nation, it makes sense to create trials that includes a small sample of colleges and secondary schools. An ideal planning group would include: college presidents and admission directors with an appetite for experimentation; high school leaders and other key school staff committed to fostering character strengths; and innovative thinkers from ETS and research communities.

The trials would build on the growing research base and try out ideas such as those above. If they prove to be successful and persuasive, there would likely be a movement within higher education and the testing community to expand the scope of the experiments and, eventually, change the admission system.

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THE OUTLIER: CREATE A COMPETITOR SYSTEM

We may discover that the testing organizations, which have a virtual monopoly as gatekeepers, are not ready or able to make major adjustments.

Moreover, we may discover that many colleges, especially selective ones, are not inclined to tinker with the status quo. In this situation, the answer for those inclined to "march to a different drummer" would be to develop a competing testing resource and admission model designed to include character strengths as a core element.

Such a step would require a group of committed and courageous colleges, as well as major funding from outside resources. Given what so many business leaders are saying about the importance of character strengths, developing an alternative testing model would be a golden opportunity for the business community and private foundations to have a profound impact on how we identify and nurture promising young people.

A few committed multi-millionaires and a group of colleges could revise the system in a fundamental way.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

What is the realistic possibility of bringing profound change to the college admission system?

My investigation indicates that educators are waiting to see if a valid survey of character strengths emerges. Despite the rhetoric of corporate leaders and a few philanthropists, however, no one has stepped forward to finance a large-scale alternative to the prevailing system, an alternative that would include a character survey. In addition, if elevating character strengths in the admission process is a serious goal, a few colleges and ETS must be ready to test some new approaches on a large scale.

Doing anything different is always perceived to be risky. What if parents, secondary schools and colleges, who are "winners" in the existing game, are faced with different rules? What if gaming the SAT and the admission process, often the prerogative of higher income families, is no longer possible? What if colleges who decide to include character strengths as a prominent criterion are perceived to be second-rate and intellectually low brow. What if donations from wealthy parents and alumni fall off?

Colleges and universities are conservative institutions, so the prospect of a major change will raise the anxiety level.

Yet, colleges can make a virtue out of an anxiety-provoking, but significant, change. Specifically, colleges at the forefront can establish a "creative monopoly," a concept described by the columnist, David Brooks (2012).

If a few colleges, including some prestigious institutions, take a different path, they will stand out on the national stage. The first adopters will have a monopoly on a new and better approach, perhaps for a long time. They will attract the interest and support of creative and innovative people.

In the end, they will lead a revolution in how we select young men and women for college and beyond. 

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