



Institute on Character and Admission

REPORT OF THE INSTITUTE

On September 21-22, 2016, fifty-five educators, representing important constituencies in higher and secondary education, met in Columbus, Ohio, to examine character and its implications for admissions practice. Our discussions and deliberations produced the following points of agreement and potential action.

A. Need

We recognize that there is a growing interest in the role of non-cognitive attributes, including character strengths, in education. Researchers, educational reformers, educational organizations, and college and secondary school educators are involved in the national discussion. The urgency of the discussion stems, in part, from concern about the frenzy and anxiety around college admissions. Standardized testing, the fierce competition for admission to selective colleges, concern about the mental health of young people, and readiness for the working world are factors that drive the discussion.

Thanks to the work of leading researchers (many of whom participated in the Institute), we know also that (1) character attributes are crucial to success in school and work, (2) there is improving validity and reliability in non-cognitive assessments, and (3) there is rising interest among admissions leaders to utilize non-cognitive attributes in making decisions. On the latter point, a survey of admissions directors attending the Institute indicated that non-cognitive factors already play a role, however varied in nature and depth, in the admissions process.

Despite these promising developments and the fact that almost all institutional mission statements refer to aspects of character, service to others, and other non-cognitive attributes, there is an imperfect connection between these aspirational statements and the way admissions decisions are made and perceived. Moreover, among the constituencies interested in elevating non-cognitive factors in admissions and educational practice, there is a dearth of interaction and unified effort.

We recognize also that education – and its beneficiaries – play a critical role in society and the future of our nation. Our mission, therefore, is grounded in the belief that character strengths and other non-academic attributes are crucial to the kind of education that serves us best. Thus, we are committed to elevating these factors in how we educate and how we select young people for admission to our schools and colleges. We are united in our aim to develop both a plan and a strategy to realize these aims.

B. The Institute as a Response

Recognizing the growing momentum around elevating non-cognitive attributes in education and admissions, we reached out to bring together experts, thought leaders, and leading practitioners. To a great degree, the group that convened in Columbus was the product of word-of-mouth among those with a keen interest in the aims of the Institute. There was a common understanding that we would build on the initiatives and cutting-edge work of leading researchers and educators, many of whom were in attendance. The Institute approach entailed presentations by and interaction with world-class experts (Day One) and in-depth discussion and consensus-building among the participants (Day Two).

C. Emerging Sense of Purpose

Our discussions led to agreement on goals and a *modus operandi*. Specifically, we agreed to:

- implement a deliberate, thoughtful, inquiry-driven agenda
- broaden and diversify our membership, including public school representation and organizations focused on educational access
- move beyond rhetoric/critiques to concrete actions, with a strategy of feasible steps
- keep the Institute's focus on non-cognitive attributes and their role in college admissions
- seek to collaborate, where useful, with existing organizations and projects
- pursue a common mission to define and deepen the role of non-cognitive attributes and character strengths in the admissions process
- work together into the future, utilizing the Institute as an ongoing vehicle of collaboration and initiative

D. Institute Plan of Action

The deliberations of the Institute produced numerous potential actions designed to advance our common mission. The following list includes actions that are in the domain of (1) individual participants and institutions, (2) the Institute as a collective enterprise, and (3) the larger

educational community and American society. It is understood that many ideas and initiatives apply to more than one domain.

Individual/Institutional Initiatives

With a mission to define and deepen the role of non-cognitive attributes and character strengths in the admissions process, we identified actions that can be carried out by those who attended the institute, on their own or in their organizations and institutions.

- (1) Promote, educate about, and “signal” our mission in our own institutions and practices. Potential targets include colleagues in our office or department, boards, presidents/principals, deans, faculty, students, parents, secondary school teachers, counselors and the media.
- (2) Elevate the knowledge level about the non-cognitive field within our offices and across the institution through educational activities, research, dialogue, materials, etc. Connect the discussion to the mission of school and its educational program.
- (3) Audit/study the alignment of institutional practices in admissions and across the institution with the goals of the Institute.
- (4) Audit and, where appropriate, revise admissions materials and practices. Be transparent about and strengthen the goal of looking for character strengths and other non-cognitive attributes.
- (5) Share the aims and work of the Institute with our schools and colleges. Draw on the resources of the Institute as a clearinghouse of information and materials to inform and educate.
- (6) Work with colleagues to examine and determine which non-cognitive, non-academic attributes fit with the mission and values of the school. Drawing on research and the work of the Institute, develop a rubric to capture the institution’s present practice. Formalize and codify the non-cognitive attributes that shape the school’s admissions process.
- (7) If available, aligned with the school’s values, and deemed appropriate as a tool, utilize a specific instrument to discern non-cognitive/character strengths. (The Character Skills Assessment, under development by the Enrollment Management Association, is a potential instrument for use by schools and colleges.)
- (8) Seek consistency in reviews and decision-making by educating and training admissions staff (and other reviewers) about non-cognitive factors and their role in a holistic review. Formalize protocols and criteria in reviews and decisions.
- (9) Reach out to feeder schools to inform them about admissions priorities, including attention to non-cognitive attributes.

(10) Revisit whether the institution will join the test-optional project. We believe the test-optional approach (a) provides students with greater opportunity and motivation to present personal strengths that are not captured by standardized testing and (b) may open up higher education opportunities to students otherwise denied access.

(11) Empower admissions staff to find and argue for students with important character strengths. Develop protocols on the kinds of evidence that are convincing.

(12) Conduct studies to validate the procedures and non-cognitive variables used in admissions decisions. Study outcomes in school, college and beyond. Define the value-added for the institution in seeking students with targeted character/non-cognitive strengths.

Institute Initiatives

We identified actions that can be taken by the Institute, both internal to the Institute and targeting a wider audience.

(1) Work together to refine and broadcast the mission, philosophy and change strategy of the Institute. This statement may include points such as addressing urgent problems in American education, relying on a sound research basis, respecting validity and reliability in designing assessments, seeking a holistic view of merit, allowing for institutional variation, aiming for a deep, authentic impact on practice across the nation, Institute priorities and a timeline, etc.

(2) In collaboration with the “Turning the Tide” effort, develop an outreach strategy to signal our mission and priorities to important constituencies, including boards, presidents, state government, and the public. Although aiming to alter practices in all institutions, we recognize the value of the Institute’s selective colleges in influencing opinion. Outreach could include a focused media campaign, involving news outlets, public service announcements, interviews, op ed pieces, blogging, social media, podcasts, TED talk, etc.

(3) Identify subgroups to work on:

- common language, rubrics and models around non-cognitive attributes
- an instrument (or instruments) as a tool in assessing non-cognitive attributes
- a clearinghouse of relevant research and writing, examples, tool kits, models, etc.
- a research base for the role of non-cognitive attributes in education, admissions, life
- a survey of admissions office practices re. non-cognitive attributes
- (admissions deans) compare how character is coded and evaluated in admissions offices and, if feasible and desirable, enunciate a common approach
- outreach/media campaign
- fundraising to support activities of the Institute

(4) Study and enunciate how elevating non-cognitive attributes in admissions can elevate, not limit, access.

(5) Invite other constituencies to join the Institute, including public school superintendents, principals, and college counselors. Invite other institutional partners to join the Institute, including access organizations (Posse; CFES), professional organizations, etc. Throw a wide net, especially in responding to those who indicate interest (the power of self-selection).

(6) As Institute members, communicate our message and agenda by doing panels/speaking at professional meetings, writing articles, doing interviews, etc.

(7) Look for common ground with other organizations, while also clarifying how the Institute is distinguished from other avenues of reform ("Turning the Tide," the Coalition, the Mastery Transcript Consortium, Common Ap task force, etc.) by emphasizing our sharp focus on character and admissions.

(8) Utilizing the knowledge base developed by the Institute, provide training of admissions staff and others in employing non-cognitive attributes in review and decision-making.

(9) Encourage, support, collate and disseminate validity studies (impact of non-cognitive factors) carried out by colleges and schools.

(10) Agree, as members of the Institute, to provide active leadership on behalf of our mission. Do this within the Institute, in our institutions and organizations, and nationally.

(11) Compose a report of the results of the September 21-22 Institute that is endorsed by Institute participants (this document). Create a version of the report for distribution nationally.

(12) Assuming agreement on the importance and breadth of our mission and on aiming to have authentic impact, convert and incorporate the Institute (a one-time event thus far) into an ongoing entity in support of our mission and agenda. This would likely involve raising funds from Institute members and/or from outside sources and maintaining an infrastructure (website; clearinghouse; event/meeting planning; communication channels; leadership; etc.).

(13) Meet again as an Institute, with expanded membership, perhaps in the summer 2017.

Initiatives that Reach Across the Nation

We identified initiatives designed to influence the national scene.

(1) Disseminate an Institute report/white paper for a national audience. This would be a call to action.

(2) Develop strategic alliances with influential organizations and reform efforts, such as the Turning the Tide initiative, the Character Lab, NACAC, the Education Conservancy, the College Board, ACT, ETS, the test-optional project, the Character Skills Assessment project of the Enrollment Management Association, the Association of Independent School Admissions Professionals, the ProExam Center for Innovative Assessments, the Mastery Transcript Consortium, the Center for Enrollment, Research, Policy and Practice at USC, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, etc.

(3) Implement a national media campaign addressed to the mission and goals of the Institute.

We recognize that these 28 action steps are sometimes overlapping and, furthermore, cannot happen all at the same time. We also recognize that, once we are agreed on action steps, we must set priorities and a timeline.

Institute Participants

Co-Directors

David Holmes	Community School
Bob Massa	Drew University

College Admissions

Adam Sapp	Pomona College
Bill Conley	Bucknell University
Christoph Guttentag	Duke University
Darlene Dilley	Westminster College
Janet Rapelye	Princeton University
Jim Bock	Swarthmore College
Jonathan Burdick	University of Rochester
Katie Fretwell	Amherst College
Kevin Rusk	University of Denver
Mike Sexton	Santa Clara University
Mike Steidel	Carnegie Mellon University
Nancy Meislahn	Wesleyan University
Stu Schmill	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Tom Willoughby	University of Denver

Secondary School Admissions

Jenna King	Riverdale Country School
Jill Thompson	Phillips Andover Academy
Nicole Suozzi	The Enrollment Management Association
Ray Diffley	Association of Independent School Admission Professionals
Tim Weir	Midland School

School/College Counselors

Alice Jackson	Independent Educational Counselor
Ann Selvitelli	Suffield Academy
Bags Brokaw	Community School
Chauncy Pogue	Community School
Irene Kim	Suffield Academy
Millie Reidy	Wood River High School
Shirley Levin	Independent Educational Counselor
Susan Tree	Westtown School
Tiffany Fujioka	Lakeside School

Research/Testing Community

Angela Duckworth	Character Lab, UPenn
Bill Hiss	Test-Optional Project
Bradley Quinn	The College Board
Carol Barry	The College Board
Chad Spurgeon	Character Lab, UPenn
Don Kamentz	Character Lab, UPenn
Jason Way	ACT
Jennifer Merriman	The College Board
Jeremy Burrus	ProExam Center for Innovative Assessments
Jerry Lucido	University of Southern California
Jinghua Liu	The Enrollment Management Association
Jonathan Martin	ProExam Center for Innovative Assessments
Lloyd Thacker	Education Conservancy
Rick Weissbourd	Harvard Graduate School of Education
Rob Franek	The Princeton Review
Sam Rikoon	Educational Testing Service
Steve Syverson	Test-Optional Project
Evelyn Johnson	Lee Pesky Learning Center

Secondary School Leaders

Ben Pettit	Community School
David Dunbar	The Masters School
Kevin Mattingly	Riverdale Country School
Lee Deick	The Masters School
Michel Sewell	Wood River High School

Educational Consultants

Carolyn Kilgus
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Sarah McGinty