NACAC

National Association for College Admission Counseling

ASSESSING CHARACTER IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS

Partnering with Youth Development Organizations to Gain Insight into Student Strengths

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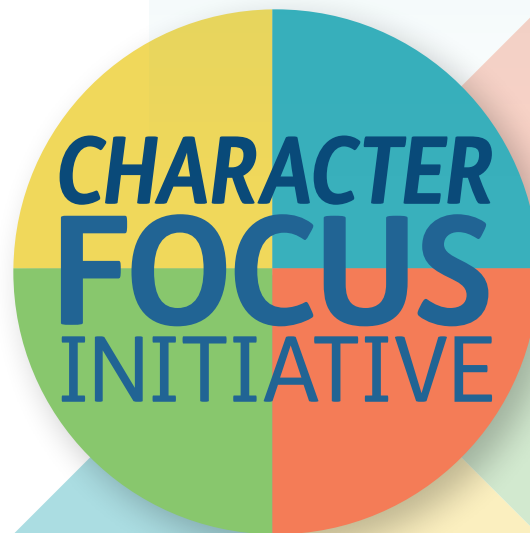
BACKGROUND

NACAC's *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access* report recognized that the modern college admission process at many institutions remains a complex, cumbersome, and bureaucratic process that at its very origin was not built to promote equity. Since the report's publication in 2022, NACAC has announced the launch of a center for reimagining college access. The center's intention is to harness research, technology, and community perspectives to create more effective and inclusive college admission practices. This innovation for college access is central to the future viability of higher education.


One initial focus of the center is the Character Focus Initiative (CFI), developed to pursue the potential evaluation of character traits and other non-academic skills in college admission. Aligning positive character traits and skills to an institution's mission and culture both guides and signals the value placed upon key personal attributes in the admission process. Additionally, this integration promotes a more equitable and vibrant future by acknowledging and incorporating a broader range of student attributes to augment traditional application components. This often-missed information assists admission officers as they strive to obtain a more complete picture of student strengths and potential. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts supported this approach in the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc., vs. Harvard College and University of North Carolina* cases when he said, "(N)othing prohibits universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected the applicant's life, so long as the discussion is concretely tied to a **quality of character** or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university."

Research shows that character and social and emotional skills matter; these skills and capacities are associated with a variety of positive outcomes including stronger performance in school; improved school climate and relationships; increased postsecondary enrollment; improved success and graduation rates in college; success in the workplace; and measures of general wellness including reports of happiness, marriage, and reduced substance use. (See Reference List on page 9.) If higher education can value character-building experiences and related qualities, and if it can evaluate such traits via an objective, high-quality process, it seems poised to welcome, center, and elevate a greater diversity of candidates in the admission process — helping both students and institutions find more alignment. As colleges and universities solicit and normalize the value of lived experiences, they can increase their relevance and value proposition and potentially catalyze greater student interest and confidence in attending college. If the college admission process itself can become a tool to welcome, recognize, and value student experiences, it may inspire more young people to seize the opportunities offered by higher education and to see college as a place where they belong — a place to be seen, heard, and valued; a place to grow and contribute.
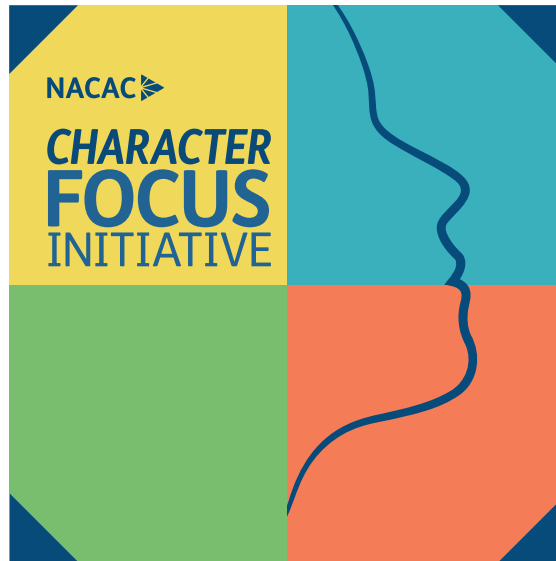
CURRENT COLLEGE ADMISSION CONTEXT

Though Justice Roberts endorsed the use of character assessment in the admission process, there still exists a recognition that the tools used in college selection have inherent flaws and weaknesses. In a holistic admission process, colleges and universities employ several sources of information when making selections and it is necessary that this information be reviewed in a consistent and valid manner. But even in such a framework, college admission is dynamic and continues to evolve to meet changes presented by students, K-12 curricula, external environments, and institutions of higher education.

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Scores or ratings across common admission assessment tools, such as standardized tests, essays, and letters of recommendation, often vary based on factors like socioeconomic status, gender, and race. The depth and breadth of academic rigor accessible to a student is often dependent upon institutional resources. The number of Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes offered by high schools is tied to the capacity to support such curriculums. Without equitable funding, students do not all have access to coursework of a similar standard. Even in the same school, the depth of course content and grading practices can vary by classroom. Research suggests that personal interviews or extracurricular activities,

including leadership roles, may be biased toward extroverted personalities and miss the contributions and potential of more introverted students. Ultimately, it is important to understand and assess a student's achievement and experiences within the context of the privilege and advantage afforded the individual. This step invites insight into a student's potential to contribute to an institution's educational environment and campus community, as well as their ability to thrive in its culture.

Assessing character traits and other non-academic skills has limitations and challenges. Assessments by their nature are imperfect, as it is hard to develop simple tools that capture the complexity of all it means to be human. And even as we strive to find better character assessment tools, the work is done in an environment where admission selection is viewed as "high stakes." Being cognizant of these shortcomings is important. For example, the use of an evidence-based character assessment may be perceived as incongruent with institutional values, such as equity and fairness, based upon the perception that prospective students may find means to game their outcomes to better align with anticipated desires in the selection process. In such an instance, the student may not display a true representation of identity, but what they perceive to be those traits favored by colleges. Gaps in training for those tasked with reviewing character attributes may also undermine the effort, making it crucial that colleges develop consistent scoring methods and shared definitions of character, reducing the risk of personal preferences entering the review process. It's also essential to recognize that students who experience marginalization may lack the support or college application knowledge needed to present their character traits as competitively or explicitly as their peers from more privileged backgrounds. Though these students possess desired characteristics, they may not have the coaching, counseling, or family direction to help them identify and share relevant lived experiences and corresponding traits. Staff training can help to prevent the unique qualifications those students bring from being lost in the process.

Admission teams must continue to diversify so that individuals with a wide range of lived experiences and understanding can join the profession, bringing their expertise and perspectives to student evaluation practices and helping organizations identify and elevate key character traits and skills that have traditionally been undervalued in the admission process. Ultimately, we have an opportunity to step back and acknowledge the potential for bias in current admission practices and the advantages privilege affords candidates in that system. We can use this insight to build better tools that allow us to learn about and value student experiences, strengths, and potential on a more even playing field.

Finally, any true reckoning of current admission practices must recognize the myriad participants involved in the process. Students and parents may attempt to influence college admission decisions toward their own favor. In some cases, parental motivations can

character and other non-academic skills. Once desired traits and skills are identified and defined by offices of admission, application readers can search for students' demonstration of preferred attributes. Additionally, many readers use rubrics to recognize and value students' character traits. This current process, though not perfect, does allow for numerous opportunities for exploration and experimentation, while recognizing that character assessment in college admission is still developing.

Exploration in character assessment invites new strategies, approaches, and metrics. These efforts should not be a burden or hinderance for participants or evaluators as there is the potential to connect more students from diverse backgrounds to higher education. Additionally, as noted above, many offices of admission will strive to diversify their teams, seeking individuals who have a greater breadth of lived experiences and a more expansive view of character to reach student populations

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be self-serving rather than in the best interest of a child. The phenomenon of "family branding" may lead parents to try to orchestrate a suite of experiences for a child designed to appeal to well-known or prestigious institutions with the purpose of looking good in social circles. Additionally, the admission process is dependent upon students' honesty. Unfortunately, there are multiple examples of students cheating on standardized tests or presenting false records of academic and non-academic achievement. These examples introduce the concern that if character evaluation were added to the admission process, some applicants may seek to present traits and abilities that may not be genuine.

As the process of reimagining college admission begins, we acknowledge that we start with an imperfect system. Many colleges are currently using extracurricular activities, personal statements, essays, letters of recommendation, and interviews to assess

who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. Ultimately, admission teams play a vital role in a strengths-based approach to candidate recruitment and evaluation as these professionals can contextualize the unique backgrounds of prospective students.

So where do admission teams turn to discover and employ new tools that can improve the college admission process? Additionally, what tools will alleviate the current burden on staff and students and bring a greater sense of confidence to the process? A scan of the environment establishes awareness that many high school students participate in youth development organizations focused on character formation. Both valuing the work of these organizations, as well as recognizing students' experiences and achievements in such activities, offer a means to assess character traits in a manner that is historically grounded and offers measured outcomes.

OPERATIONALIZING THE CONSIDERATION OF CHARACTER ON A LARGER SCALE

As the following diagram from the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (IN) admission office suggests, the intentional placement, definition, and nature of character assessment in the admission process and in an institution's organizational philosophy is an important first step.
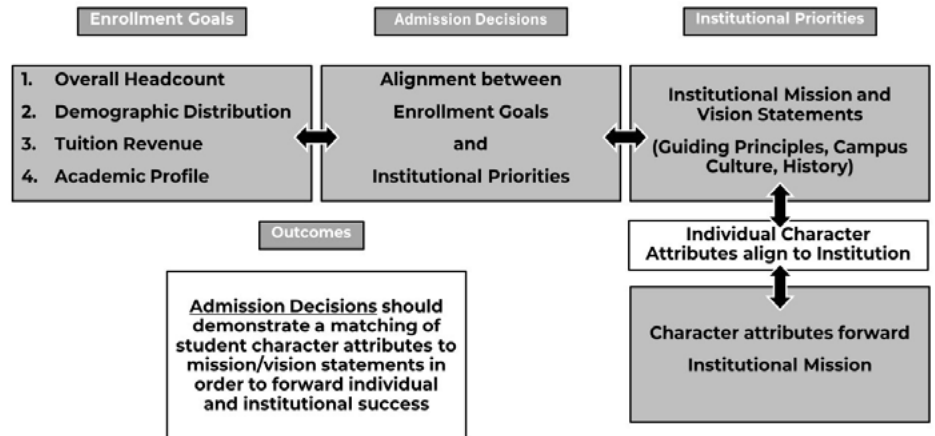
Beyond broad institutional definitions, many admission offices already factor character into admission decision-making. A 2023 study by NACAC found that positive character attributes ranked behind only grades and curriculum strength in importance for admission decisions.

Given the current and inevitable future legal scrutiny of the college admission processes, building on, formalizing, and making such assessments transparent to all stakeholders is a critical next step. While the number of ways in which character can be demonstrated are too numerous to count, identifying existing structures by which admission offices can glean such information is a logical starting point.

Source: Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology

PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMAN, FALL 2023

	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
High school grades in college prep courses	185	76.8	15.1	4.9	3.2
Total high school grades (all courses)	185	74.1	18.9	5.4	1.6
Strength of high school curriculum	185	63.8	22.7	10.3	3.2
Positive character attributes	184	28.3	37.5	18.5	15.8
Essay or writing sample	185	18.9	37.3	26.5	17.3
Student's interest in attending	185	15.7	27.6	25.4	31.4
Counselor recommendation	185	11.9	40.0	27.6	20.5
Teacher recommendation	185	10.8	40.5	28.1	20.5
Extracurricular activities	185	6.5	44.3	30.8	18.4
High school class rank	183	5.5	22.4	43.2	29.0
Admission test scores (ACT, SAT)	185	4.9	25.4	38.9	30.8
Portfolio	185	4.9	10.8	24.3	60.0
Interview	185	4.3	8.6	32.4	54.6
Work	185	2.2	30.8	40.0	27.0
State graduation exam scores	185	1.6	6.5	18.4	73.5
Subject test scores (AP, IB)	185	1.1	22.2	25.9	50.8

Source: NACAC's State of College Admission report, 2023

> Beyond broad institutional definitions, many admission offices already factor character into admission decision-making.

A PATH FORWARD: COLLABORATION WITH YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

A student's participation in youth development organizations can signal the pursuit and acquisition of desired character traits and support character assessment in the admission process. Determining an applicant's level of character attainment requires that colleges 1) understand how youth development organizations effectively facilitate skill-building, and 2) gauge an applicant's individual level of participation and engagement. Building close ties between colleges and youth development organizations can improve recognition of character traits in the admission process without creating an additional burden on students.

Widening pipelines to access students is a critical step in the college recruitment process but understanding the context that shapes individual cognitive and non-cognitive attributes is also necessary. Among the myriad ways in which students can develop and exhibit character traits, the demonstrated involvement in organized youth activities can provide an important model for defining and assessing personality traits and other non-cognitive skills. Many youth development organizations measure the impact of their programming on participants. Additionally, youth development organizations have a wealth of expertise in character formation and are well-positioned to help higher education build a bridge to their campuses and encourage students to walk across it.

Youth engagement and programming have proven important to interpersonal development. Evidence also suggests that parents encourage involvement in such organizations to nurture desirable character traits. With character traits considered malleable, a student's association and accomplishments in a youth development organization can shape their skills, behaviors, and values.

Youth organizations provide ready-made frameworks that can be easily adapted to college admission rubrics. The mission statements, programming opportunities, and recognized achievements of youth development organizations list the character traits students pursue through involvement. Many youth development organizations deliver curriculum and assess its impact according to key domains of skill-building. These important social-emotional and character skills can begin to illuminate the strengths a candidate will carry with them to college and as they face new and increasing challenges. A national mosaic of strong, effective, and research-validated youth development organizations actively builds the skills that lead to character development.

For privileged and marginalized students alike, youth development experiences can be foundational to value formation. One-time and repeat experiences in camps, clubs, and after-school and enrichment programs provide students a chance to practice social and emotional skills and to build character. Many youth development programs formally and informally employ and leverage a basic theory of change that is key to character development. In such programs, groups of students learn new skills, implement them in new shared experiences, and together learn from both success and failure. Caring coaches, mentors, and instructors facilitate or support these group learning experiences, modeling character as they go. The validated cycle of implementing and practicing social-emotional skills can build key character traits like compassion, empathy, conflict resolution, and resilience. Youth development experiences and their resulting character traits can become great indicators of a student's potential to thrive in a higher education community.

A CLOSER LOOK AT YOUTH DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATION

Exploration in character assessment can invite new strategies and approaches, as well as new partners from the field of youth development. If higher education's goal is to increase and diversify enrollment through more relevant admission practices and better values alignment, then youth development is a good place to seek that partnership.

Character is malleable, especially in the teen years, and youth involvement in character development activities during these formative years is considered a key indicator of future success. Youth development organizations have long histories of serving youth effectively and their work is centered in research-validated approaches to social-emotional learning and development. Youth-serving nonprofits like Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs, scouting, the YMCA, Upward Bound, and Outward Bound deliver programs that are designed to develop social-emotional skills via practical application in group activities with peers and adults.

The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Development, the Pear Institute, Making Caring Common, and others have studied how effective youth development activities can build character, build community, and help young people develop key interpersonal skills. Colleges and universities can also tap these research engines for guidance as they build out character assessment processes. Widening student pipelines is a critical step in improving college access and recruitment, and working through youth development organizations is a means to do so. There may be myriad ways a young person can develop character, but engagement in youth development

activities with local, regional, and national youth-serving nonprofits may be one reliable indicator of character or skill development.

Youth development organizations also understand the challenges that students who experience marginalization face. Through professional and lived experiences, youth development professionals have firsthand knowledge of the positive character traits that young people develop when they cope with adversity and take on a greater diversity of responsibilities. The lived experience of students who have encountered marginalization can be recognized as a key indicator of potential resilience and success in a learning community. College admission personnel play a vital role in a strengths-based approach to candidate recruitment and evaluation, and youth development organizations may be a key source of expertise, skill, and personnel to build the next generation of college admission professionals and new character-driven practices within the admission process.

Building close ties between colleges and youth development organizations can improve the recognition of character traits in college admission, but higher education will need to evolve without placing additional burdens on students or youth-serving organizations. Colleges and universities will need to learn how to better recognize and evaluate character experiences, and the onus is on higher education professionals to shepherd in the change they wish to see. Youth development can help higher education build bridges to their learning communities, but it will be up to colleges and universities to help students walk across them.
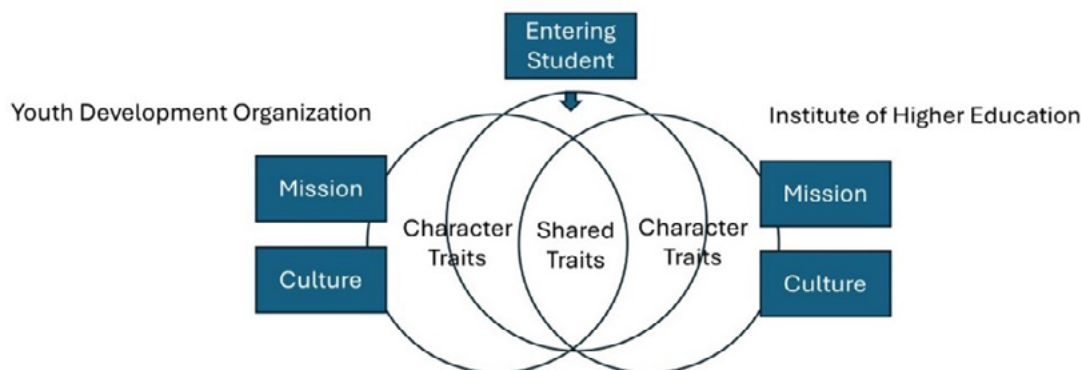
A STEP TOWARD A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE FOR POSTSECONDARY ACCESS

As one step toward a more robust, research-based assessment of positive character traits in the college admission process, colleges and universities may benefit from greater engagement with and broader understanding of youth development organizations and the traits they aim to develop in young people. Increasing engagement will require intention. Corralling a large body of research about a vast landscape of organizations for the purpose of informing college admission counseling professionals at thousands of universities is a significant task. The following action steps constitute a helpful starting point:

Action Steps:

1. **Raise awareness in offices of admission on the work of youth development organizations to form an individual's character traits.** Significant research from both youth organizations and academic scholars quantifies the impact that such purposeful programming has on an individual's skill and ability growth. Presenting this information will allow offices of admission to recognize and incorporate character attainment in their holistic admission review processes.

2. **Create a forum for youth development organizations and institutions of higher education to share information, connect, and work collaboratively.** This allows for mission alignment between institutions of higher education and youth organizations; an exchange of best practices in building partnerships; and shared education and training.

> Character evaluation provides higher education and youth development with a unique opportunity to partner for both student and institutional success.

3. **Encourage outreach to students in youth development organizations.** In recruitment, institutions of higher education can share messaging on mission, culture, and learning experiences and outline the character traits sought in their student body. Likewise, students can narrow their college choices based upon personal value systems that align with institutional attributes.

4. **Practice college selection in a manner that aligns admission criteria with the mission-based goals and values of the institution.** Encourage students to apply to colleges and universities in alignment with their personal values. Incorporate character into the admission process and select students who best fit the institutional culture to promote individual and institutional success.

5. **Upon college enrollment, encourage student engagement with learning opportunities and environments that are purposefully shaped by the institution's mission, culture, and history.** Student achievement in degree attainment is positively influenced by a curriculum that purposefully expounds character pursuit and growth. Cultivate such programming and provide opportunities for student assessment and measurement in desired growth areas.

As institutions of higher education encourage, embrace, and value the character traits that youth development organizations model and promote, colleges can tangibly advance diversity, equity, and inclusion, and ultimately increase interest and access to their institutions. Character evaluation provides higher education and youth development with a unique opportunity to partner for both student and institutional success. Together, these entities can create and share character assessment best practices, reach more candidates, increase student access, and diversify college communities.

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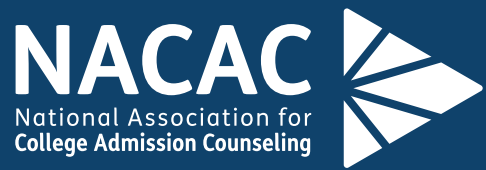
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