COMMENTARY

# The Risks of Focusing on Character in Admissions

Pui Yan Fong for The Chronicle

*By Rebecca Zwick* | JULY 30, 2017 ✔

PREMIUM

Grit is the four-letter word that colleges want to hear, according to a website offering advice to applicants. Grit, which encompasses characteristics like perseverance, determination, and the ability to delay gratification, is one of many so-called "noncognitive" and "character" factors promoted as a way to acquire a more complete picture of applicants than can be obtained through test scores and high-school grades alone. An article on college admissions in *The Chronicle* this year was headlined, "Wanted: High-Character Students." So perhaps some 2017 applicants got a thumbs-down because they were short on character rather than test scores or grade points.

This interest in noncognitive factors is understandable. Colleges, not wishing to fill their classes with one-dimensional résumé-polishers, hope that broadening their admissions criteria will yield a more diverse entering class. But it's worth considering both the ethical implications and the technical challenges of going down that road.

First of all, it's important to keep in mind that a focus on character is not always benign. In his book *The Chosen,* Jerome B. Karabel, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, noted that Harvard, Princeton, and Yaleinvoked "personality" and "character" in the early 20th century so as to "admit the dull sons of major donors and … exclude the brilliant but unpolished children of immigrants." Similarly, Nicholas Murray Butler,

Columbia's president for most of the first half of the 20th century, stated that the university planned "to put more and more stress on personal and family background, character and personality, and not to depend exclusively upon the results of formal examination tests." The goal, says the historian Harold Wechsler, was to craft a policy that would put an end to "the Jewish invasion."

But let's assume that current efforts to incorporate noncognitive attributes in admissions are well-intentioned. How should these characteristics be measured? Even Angela Duckworth, grit's high-profile promoter, acknowledges that measuring personal qualities is complex, and that making educational decisions on the basis of those measurements is challenging. How, for example, would admissions officials really know which applicants were the most persevering?

Efforts to use questionnaires to measure noncognitive factors can be undermined by interpretation errors, varying frames of reference, and deliberate distortions. Consider an agree/disagree item that has actually been used in admissions: "I get easily discouraged when I try to do something and it doesn't work." How many applicants would say "Agree"?

More significantly, it is not clear that the most-sought-after personal qualities can be developed. An extensive review of research notes that despite the recent attention paid to grit, there is little evidence that it is malleable. If grit is more of a personality characteristic than a changeable behavior, is it fair to consider it in admissions decisions? And if we do reward grit, are we creating yet another obstacle for victims of poverty? After all, it's easier to persevere in some milieus than in others.

What about evaluating candidates' character by focusing more on extracurricular activities and less on grades and test scores? This is the recommendation of a recent report from Harvard, "Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions." The lead author, Richard Weissbourd, deplores the fact that the current focus on character tends to emphasize grit. He believes that applicants should be valued not merely for academic performance (which grit is presumed to enhance), but also for activities that show concern for

the common good. According to the report, the goal of a "healthy and fair admissions process" should be to "redefine achievement in ways that create greater equity and access for economically diverse students."

But in "Creating a Class," his compelling sociological study of college admissions, Mitchell Stevens shows how even the most comprehensive candidate evaluations favor wealthier students. When candidates can describe interesting jobs and extracurricular pursuits, their advocates on the admissions committee can use this rich material to argue their case.

A study of more than 300 university applicants in the United Kingdom offers insight into this phenomenon. Applicants were asked to write personal statements that would ensure that they "stood out from the crowd."

Although these candidates had equivalent exam scores, the quality of their statements depended heavily on the socioeconomic level of their secondary schools. Applicants from wealthier schools had a much more inspiring set of experiences to draw on. While a student who came from a family of lower socioeconomic status mentioned a part-time waitress job at a pub, for example, a private-school student described "a work-experience placement to shadow the Pakistani ambassador to the United Nations."

The upshot, says the researcher Steven Jones, is that "nonacademic indicators, such as the personal statement, may disfavor young people from certain educational backgrounds."

So while obtaining a broader picture of applicants' qualifications is a worthy goal, the legitimacy and fairness of using "character" measures in admissions decisions requires careful consideration and study. We should not simply assume that rewarding grittiness, professed dedication to the common good, or other personal factors will improve the admissions process.

First, we should review what we already know. Although many view it as a new frontier, the idea of including noncognitive measures in admissions is more than half a century old, and much of the early literature remains relevant today.

Second, it is important to consider the perspectives not only of college personnel but also of students, parents, high-school teachers, and the general public about the possible implications of any significant change in admissions policy. What message would a new emphasis on character or personality send, and how might it change student behavior?

Finally, pilot studies should be used to test out the use of any proposed measures before wholesale adoption is considered. By all means, let's continue exploring noncognitive attributes in college admissions — but let's do it cautiously.

*Rebecca Zwick is a senior researcher at the Educational Testing Service and a professor emerita at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her book,* Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions, *has just been published by Harvard University Press. The opinions expressed here are her own and not necessarily those of the ETS.*

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1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037