

NACAC

National Association for
College Admission Counseling



CHARACTER IN COLLABORATION:

*Improving College Access Through
Character Development Programming*

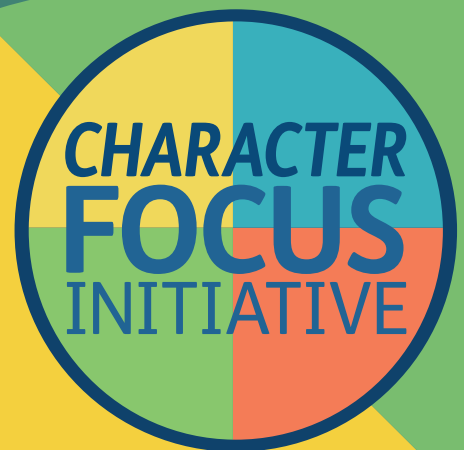


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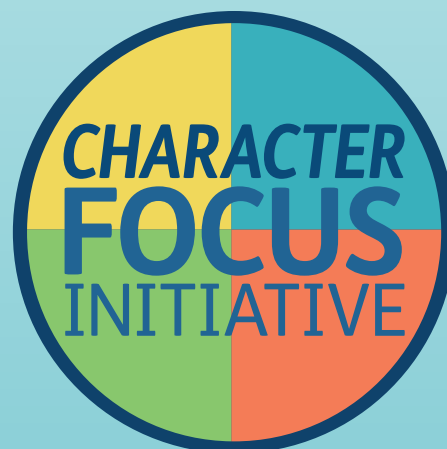
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INTRODUCTION: CHARACTER MATTERS

It was a phrase often repeated by the late David Holmes, a college professor and long-time independent school head. His intention was beyond that of a rally cry for the efforts of the Character Collaborative—the organization he co-founded, stewarded, and championed with friend, academic colleague, and career college admissions officer, Bob Massa. Spurred on by Angela Duckworth’s “character movement,” the partners saw the importance of highlighting character in college admission—both as a critical counterpart to cognitive attributes and with the understanding that such recognition would foster access and facilitate college success for all students.

David spoke boldly about the importance of promoting positive character skills in all aspects of life. He believed this emphasis did not just end in our institutions of higher education but should be present in all shared communities. This simple belief, reflected in David’s own life and writing, illuminates that when we recognize and support the best that exists in each person—we improve the living experience for all.

In the first discussion paper acknowledging the contributions of David Holmes, [Assessing Character in the College Admission Process](#), the authors called for moving beyond the recognition of character skills in college admission to put this concept into

practice. The Character Focus Initiative, under the leadership of the new [National Association of College Admissions Counselors’ \(NACAC\) Center for Innovation in College Admission](#), formed a partnership including Voyager Outward Bound School (VOBS) and E3n (formerly the Enrollment Management Association). Together, these organizations invited K-12 partners and community-based organizations to participate in an outdoor character development program to prepare students for college access and success. The details of this collaboration will be discussed in this paper, along with perspectives from professionals across the field on how character is impacting their work and what role character may play in the future of college admission.

Preliminary evidence suggests that character-focused programming like VOBS outdoor summer courses

can positively influence student preferences for some character skills, including intellectual engagement, resilience, self-control, and teamwork. These findings are reinforced by qualitative insights from key stakeholders in the VOBS intervention. These perspectives provide greater insight into the design and implementation of character-focused programming and the value of these skills for all students.



BACKGROUND

Non-cognitive skills, defined here as character skills, are an increasingly important way of understanding the potential of success for students from K-12 schools, colleges, and throughout adult life (Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Ohman, 2015; Smithers et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). Character skills are often considered the counterpart to cognitive abilities (e.g., reading, math, and verbal skills), which have a long history as the gold standard for college admission testing. This is due to cognitive skill ability to assess subject-specific knowledge and intellectual prowess—important indicators of potential success in higher education. However, the importance of non-cognitive skills has long been recognized (Binet & Simon, 1916), with the utilization of character skills as supplementary information for enrollment decisions in recent years (Almlund et al., 2011; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Egalite et al., 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2013).



There is ample opportunity to expand access to character skills through collaborations within schools and with youth development organizations.

— *Tom Bear, Assessing Character in the College Admission Process*

Increasing appreciation for character skills can be attributed in part to the evolving political landscape and recognition that there should be a more holistic admission process at the college level (Bear et al., 2024). There is also recent evidence that character skills are predictive of various educational, occupational, psychosocial, and health outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008; Heckman et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2015; Ohman, 2015; Smithers et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). The growing importance of character skills was further supported by NACAC's State of College Admission report (2023), where character was ranked fourth as the most important consideration for college admission. In addition, the

Character Focus Initiative is a critical part of NACAC's new [Center for Innovation in College Admission](#), which seeks to pursue a more equitable college admission system through research-driven solutions in collaboration with leaders in the enrollment profession.

The Character Focus Initiative (CFI) gathers professionals in the advancement and recognition of the use of positive character skills in the college admission process. The first in a series of discussion papers, [Assessing Character in the College Admission Process](#), which honors the work of David Holmes—a former college professor and long-time independent school head—is an example of the work of the CFI. Authored by Tom Bear (Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology), Trisha Ross Anderson (Harvard University, Making Caring Common), and Marlais Brand (Voyageur Outward Bound School), this team came together to advocate for both the use of character in college admission decision-making and the benefits of partnering with youth development organizations to recognize positive skills that are associated with college access and success.

Youth development organizations hold a strong focus on developing character skills through programs that students actively want to engage in. Words like “confidence,” “resilience,” “smart,” “bold,” “ethical,” “moral,” “leadership,” “responsibility,” “teamwork,” and “caring” appear in the mission statements of organizations such as Boys and Girls Club of America, 4-H, First Robotics, Boy Scouts of America, Girls, Inc., and Future Farmers of America. Additionally, many of the youth organizations deliver curriculum and assess program impact according to key skill-building domains with a focus on building character skills. These youth development organizations provide ready-made frameworks that colleges can adapt into their college admission assessments.

Character skills are already a fixture of the college admissions landscape. Part of the appeal of character skills is their malleability across adolescence and amenability to intervention (Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Kautz et al., 2014). Admissions offices already highlight the need for students to possess positive character skills. This has been supported by a meta-analysis showing that character interventions can increase targeted skills and are already highly ranked in college admissions considerations (Durlak et al., 2011; NACAC, 2023).

There is ample opportunity to expand access to character skills through collaborations within school and with youth development organizations. Although these skills are highly desirable for college admissions officers, focused opportunities to develop these skills are often only available to students who attend schools with character skills interventions. These types of opportunities are very limited. For example, in their study of 153 character-education programs Brown and colleagues (2022) found only seven were offered as after school programs to K-12 students. This constitutes a potential advantage for some students who are fortunate enough to go to a school that offers an intervention, but a disadvantage for those without such learning opportunities. Increasing accessibility to affordable interventions focused on building character skills outside of the classroom is important to allow all students a fair chance at character skill development and equitable college access.

In 2025, Voyageur Outward Bound School (VOBS) answered the call for character-based programming—laid out by Bear and

colleagues (2024) [in *Assessing Character in the College Admission Process*](#)—to create an accessible character course that promoted access and success in college, offered financial aid to increase its accessibility, and created partnerships with organizations across the K-12 education space. Courses at Outward Bound USA (the parent organization of VOBS) are internally assessed with measurements backed by research, but there has not been external evaluation of the impact of the intervention. VOBS contacted E3n (formally known as the Enrollment Management Association) early in 2025 to begin the process of critically examining their character-centered course. The next section provides an overview of the Voyageur program evaluated as well as details of the E3n quantitative analysis. Quantitative analysis is only part of the contributions of this study, however, as collaborators from many organizations came together to inform and design a program to more effectively support student character development. Reflections from those partners are included after E3n's evaluation of the VOBS program.

Expanding access to character-building opportunities outside the classroom is essential to giving all students a fair chance at developing the skills that support equitable college access.

VOYAGEUR OUTWARD BOUND'S CHARACTER-CENTERED COURSE

In the summer of 2025, Voyageur Outward Bound School (VOBS) planned and organized a series of character skill-building courses. Outward Bound, the national organization responsible for broad course planning at VOBS, has a long history of fostering character through its programming. Character-building is core to Outward Bound and VOBS' missions, although it has not always been stated as an objective of specific courses. However, in early 2025 VOBS leadership decided they would like to place character at the forefront of a new set of summer courses. They also wanted to more formally investigate the course's impact on character, contacting E3n to plan a study examining how character skill preferences changed before and after the course. E3n began collaborating with VOBS to design a study with the goals of:

- Understanding the structure of the course and how systematic pre- and post-test research could be best conducted for future courses.

- Providing limited support for the course's efficacy based on the study design, which was principally based on describing the differences between character skills preferences before and after the course (absent other controls).

The remainder of this section is organized into several subsections. We first describe the student sample who participated in the course, the measures used, and data collection procedure. We then provide the results of the study and move into a discussion of the potential impacts of the intervention. Next, we lay out a framework to improve future data collection and study procedures for character-focused programming. Finally, we highlight limitations of the study.

VOBS leadership decided they would place character at the forefront of a new set of summer courses.

SAMPLE

A total of 44 students ($n = 44$) participated in the course from six different schools. 20 participants (45.5%) identified as male, 19 (43.2%) identified as female, 4 (9.1%) identified as non-binary or a third gender, and 1 (2.3%) preferred not to respond. In terms of ethnicity, 24 participants (54.5%) identified as White or Caucasian, 10 (22.7%) as Black or African American, 3 (6.8%) as Asian, and 2 (4.5%) as Other. Additionally, 2 participants (4.5%) identified as both White and Black or African American, 2 (4.5%) identified as both White and Other, and 1 (2.3%) preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. Students were mostly in Grade 11 ($n = 27$, 61.4%). Smaller proportions were in Grade 10 ($n = 7$, 15.9%), Grade 12 ($n = 7$, 15.9%), and Grade 9 ($n = 3$, 6.8%). In the six-week follow-up, 12 students (3.7%) completed the Character Skills Snapshot, but demographic information was not re-collected to reduce testing time.

MEASURES

The Character Skills Snapshot (the Snapshot) was used to measure character skill preferences pre- and post-intervention. It measures six character skills including: teamwork, resilience, open-mindedness, intellectual engagement, self-control, and initiative. The Snapshot was designed in to further enhance the Outward Bound Outcomes Survey (OBOS), a retrospective survey designed in collaboration with Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) to assess self-reported changes in key areas—including self-confidence, teamwork, and resilience—following participation in Outward Bound programming. The Snapshot is scored using Item Response Theory (IRT), where student scores are norm-referenced. Snapshot student scores fall, typically, within a range of -3 to 3. A score of 0 indicates a student scored at the mean level of students from E3n's nationally representative sample. A score of 1 indicates they are 1 standard deviation (SD) above the sample mean and so on.

While there is some overlap in the skills measured by the OBOS and the Snapshot, the Snapshot was used as the primary tool for examining pre- and post-test differences, while the OBOS was used as a sensitivity check to determine if aligned skills moved in the same direction as their Snapshot counterparts. Due to their familiarity with the OBOS, the addition of the Snapshot survey was intuitive for VOBS course instructors. Snapshot data serves as the primary data for our analysis, with results displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

SURVEY PROCEDURE

Students were recruited from schools on a volunteer basis by direct outreach and recruitment calls to K-12 private schools and community programs. Before arriving for the intervention, parents and students were asked to complete a consent form that gave permission for participation in the research study. Students did not receive any incentive for participating in the research study beyond access to VOBS programming.

After the students arrived, they were asked to complete a pre-intervention survey with Character Skills Snapshot and Outward Bound Outcomes Survey. After completing the pre-survey, groups of 4-10 students were led by an instructor on an eight-day outdoor expedition that constituted the intervention. Once all students returned from the expedition, they were asked to complete the same surveys again (post-intervention survey). The next section provides a summary of the quantitative analysis results generated from pre-post Snapshot survey data.

Data was first cleaned before any analyses were performed. Data that indicated a false start (e.g., a student opened the survey then closed it) was omitted (n (number of students) = 2 responses). Data that could not be paired together for various reasons (e.g., two responses from one student ID, demographic information did not align) from Time Point 1 (TP1, pre-intervention survey) and 2 (TP2, post-intervention survey) were omitted ($n = 4$). After cleaning the data, there were a total of 46 complete and merged student survey responses. Additionally, we focused our analyses on grades 10 through 12 for the Snapshot as they composed a majority of the sample. As a result, we removed three responses from all grade levels below those ($n = 3$).

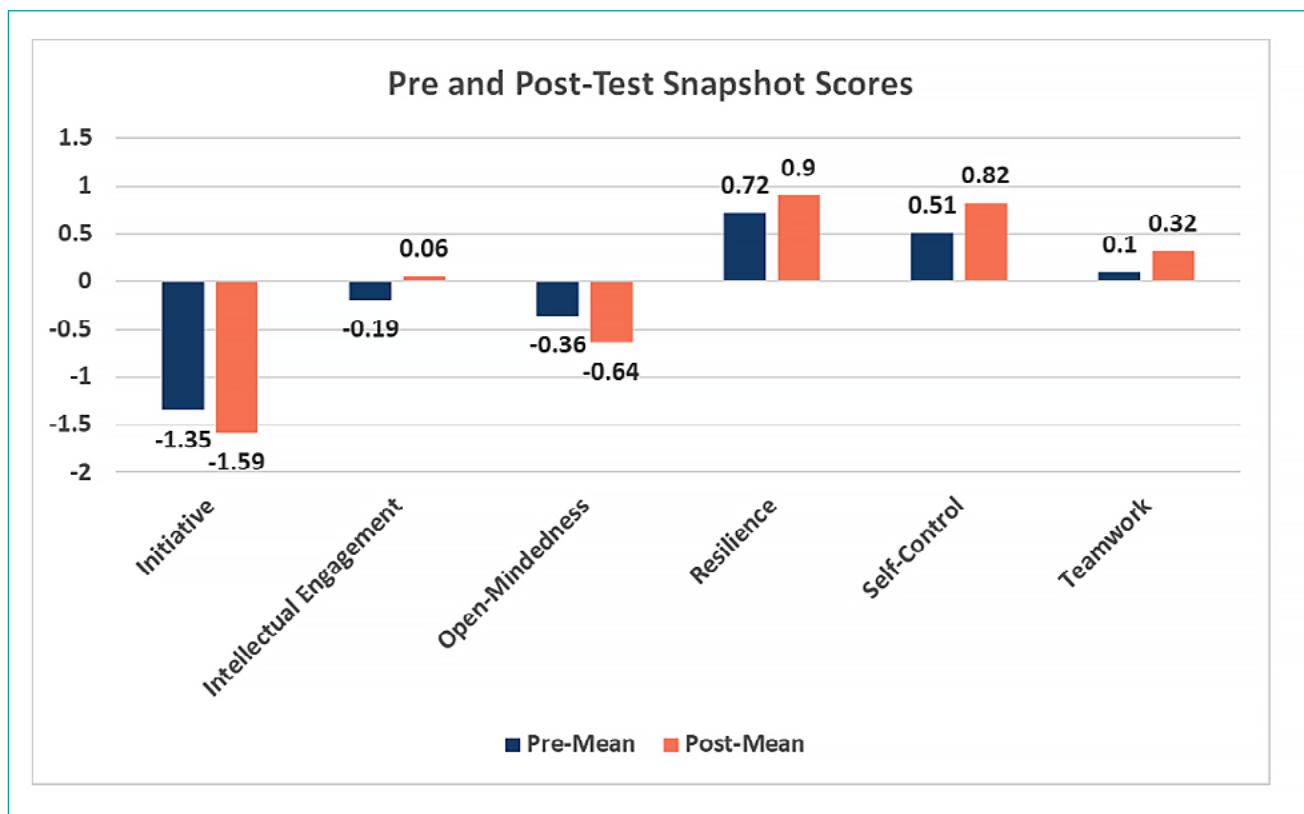
FINDINGS

After cleaning the data, the student responses were scored on the Snapshot at both time points (pre- and post-intervention) and descriptive statistics were computed. The mean and mean differences, the difference between post-intervention and pre-intervention scores, for the two time points are in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1. Overall, four of the six character skill preferences—intellectual engagement, resilience, self-control, and teamwork—measured by the Snapshot saw an increase from pre- to post-intervention. For example, intellectual engagement increased from -0.19 below the mean student character skill preference to 0.06 points above the mean for a mean difference of 0.26 points. This means, as an example, that from the start of the course to completion, the students on average increased in the preference for teamwork, or working in a team. Contrary to the four character skill preferences that showed increases, initiative and open-mindedness showed decreases from pre- to post-intervention.

Table 1 - Pre-and Post-Test Snapshot Scores

Skill	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (Post – Pre)
Initiative	-1.35 (0.80)	-1.59 (0.74)	-0.24
Intellectual Engagement	-0.19 (0.68)	0.06 (0.86)	0.26
Open-Mindedness	-0.36 (0.68)	-0.64 (0.75)	-0.28
Resilience	0.72 (0.83)	0.90 (0.91)	0.18
Self-Control	0.51 (0.73)	0.82 (0.85)	0.31
Teamwork	0.10 (0.71)	0.32 (0.77)	0.22

Figure 1 - Pre and Post-Test Snapshot Scores



DISCUSSION: TRANSLATING DATA TO LIVED EXPERIENCE

This study provides preliminary evidence that interventions like VOBS' outdoor summer course may positively influence some student character skills, a finding that is further contextualized by the perspectives of key leaders in the field in the next section. Intellectual engagement, resilience, self-control, and teamwork all had significant increases in student preference post-intervention. While most character skills showed an increase in student preference, initiative and open-mindedness did not show increases. Additional research can shed light on why certain character traits translate into positive student preferences while others do not.

The study described in this paper represents only a portion of the analysis that was conducted with this rich dataset. Additional analyses included examining response times, tests of statistical significance, and other features of the data like alignment with the Outward Bound Outcomes Survey and Snapshot scores. There are the following limitations to this study. Results are preliminary and limited in terms of what it may say about the efficacy of the course in instilling students with positive character skills. Future research should explore a much larger sample and include more controls within data collection such as carefully documenting any actions taken by instructors to support character building or providing a clear outline of how to approach situations. These measures are needed before we can fully explore how participation in the summer course offered by VOBS predicts changes in character skill preferences.

While a rigorous causal link requires more research, the preliminary trends we observed—including the mean increases in intellectual engagement, resilience, self-control, and teamwork—provide an essential data-driven context for the expert perspectives that follow. These quantitative results affirm the core premise that intentional, experiential learning can successfully foster the very character skills valued by the key stakeholders in the next section.



The quantitative analysis of pre- and post-intervention measures was also only one objective of the study. The main purpose of this study was to demonstrate how research organizations and non-profit organizations can work together to harness each other's expertise when it comes to student character skill development and attainment. The next section of this paper furthers this objective by providing insights from key stakeholders who were involved in the VOBS research. Their insights and professional experience contextualize why efficacious character-building programs like those at VOBS are vital in an evolving educational landscape.

WHY CHARACTER MATTERS—PERSPECTIVES FROM VOBS COLLABORATION LEADERS

There is an increasing desire to foster character and consider its importance for future academic and career success with some organizations already making great strides. At the VOBS roundtable, stakeholders, including key collaborators and researchers, listened to student perspectives on how the course mattered to them. This event brought together organizations and leaders from across the field, with the goal of illuminating the value of work focused on building character skills and examining how to foster further growth with schools, scholars, and nonprofits.

The remainder of this paper brings those perspectives into focus with leaders of each collaborating organization offering their perspective on character, its importance, and where the field is going. First, as the main partner organization for VOBS programming, Meg Peterson offers Outward Bound

USA's (OBUSA) perspective on what spurred the collaboration between E3n and Voyageur Outward Bound Schools (VOBS). Then, Dr. Stephanie J. Hull, the CEO of Girls Inc., a large youth development organization and participant in the VOBS course, details how they approach character development.

Next, David Bonner from Culver Academy, a participating school in the VOBS course, provides his perspective on the importance of character and how it can be built into the foundation of a school's purpose. Finally, Dr. Ann Duffy, a principal consultant at Education First and a major contributor to the Character Focus Initiative at [NACAC's Center for Innovation in College Admission](#), synthesizes the research conducted at VOBS and these stakeholder perspectives into a clear call for action with concrete next steps.

MEG PETERSON, DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, OUTWARD BOUND USA

This cross-sector collaboration between E3n, Voyageur Outward Bound School, and Outward Bound USA emerged from a shared commitment to expanding access to character development, college pathways, and outdoor learning. Through OBUSA's Advancing Access in the Outdoors initiative, OBUSA has been working to ensure that character building experiences are available to more young people, particularly those historically underrepresented in outdoor education and post-secondary pathways.

Within this context, VOBS partnered with E3n to move character from theory into practice. Together, they designed and studied a character-centered course that explicitly connected outdoor challenge with college access and readiness, pairing Outward Bound's long standing educational practice with research-grounded inquiry and collaboration across the educational field.

What began as a regional pilot now informs a broader national strategy. Early learnings from VOBS and its partners clarified the importance of shared evaluation, sustained pathways, and deeper collaboration across education sectors. These insights are being carried forward through OBUSA's Character Compass Initiative. Through Character Compass, OBUSA is strengthening and scaling character focused programming across its national network, aligning outcomes and learning while deepening access to sustained outdoor experiences that spark growth over time.

Together, this work reflects a shared belief that character matters and that meaningful challenges, supported by strong relationships, can spark the confidence, compassion, and skills young people need to thrive in college and beyond.



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— Meg Peterson, Director of Business Development, Outward Bound USA

STEPHANIE J. HULL, PH.D., PRESIDENT AND CEO, GIRLS INC.

For decades, youth development organizations have known something that higher education is starting to recognize—character is not a byproduct of education, but a prerequisite for it. Character is known to be a protective factor, counteracting and even helping to prevent adverse childhood experiences by giving girls the resilience and confidence to navigate setbacks, manage stress, and ask for help when they need it.

At Girls Inc., we have always helped girls build character. It is embedded in everything we do. But in recent years, the cultural and social context has called for a more deliberate approach. The girls in our programs are navigating rising anxiety, social media pressure, and the relentless weight of comparison and competition. These are not abstract challenges—they are an everyday struggle for too many young people. The moral obligation we feel to give the next generation the tools and skills to change this reality has pushed us to make character development not just implicit, but explicit. Character is named, practiced, and measurable through our mentoring conversations, in the academic and life skills programming we offer, and in the experiences we provide.



Character is not a
byproduct of education,
but a prerequisite for it.

— Stephanie J. Hull, CEO, Girls Inc.

Girls Inc. focuses on six core elements of character: “confidence,” “critical thinking,” “emotional intelligence,” “kindness,” “respect,” and “self-advocacy.” These are not aspirational values posted on a wall. They are modeled by adult mentors, practiced through real experiences, and reinforced through internal reflection.

The recent partnership between Girls Inc. and Voyageur Outward Bound School illustrates what becomes possible when mission-aligned organizations work together to amplify outcomes. In the summer of 2025, seven girls from four of our Affiliates (Girls Inc. of [Sioux City](#), [Greater Atlanta](#), [Chicago](#), and [Omaha](#)) completed Voyageur’s eight-day character expedition in the backcountry of Minnesota. They hauled heavy canoes and gear, experienced true wilderness (including insects), and relied on each other in ways no classroom can replicate. Those are exactly the conditions where character is strengthened.

Those of us who work in youth development and experiential learning consistently see the same pattern: challenge, paired with reflection and support, produces character growth. Character develops through lived experience and relationships, not in abstract examples, and it must be modeled, not mandated, by the community if it is to take root deeply.

This is precisely why higher education should lean in. Colleges say they want students who can navigate adversity, collaborate across differences, and contribute to a thoughtful and thriving community. Those are character skills, and many applicants, particularly those from under-resourced backgrounds, have developed them in abundance. Organizations like Girls Inc. can even help participants to name and reflect on the deeper impact of these skills, not just the surface-level experiences that might or might not lead to their acquisition.

The question is whether admission processes are designed to recognize and value character as a measurable outcome, given that it may be competing with a long-established value system that may still privilege exposure and opportunity rather than the development of positive character skills themselves. Getting into college is no longer the finish line. Persisting, belonging, and thriving are the real measures of success. And character, it turns out, makes all the difference.

DAVE BONNER, DIRECTOR OF COLLEGE ADVISING, CULVER ACADEMY

Character is about living a good life and being an engaged and positive citizen. Culver Academies—a co-educational 9th-12th grade boarding school in Culver, Indiana—celebrates this, and it is core to our mission. Character is also a lens for understanding oneself and how to work with others. Experiences reveal character in meaningful ways, leading to individual and community growth. While there is great truth and much to say about the inequity of support available to potential college applicants, we are all grounded in the fact that context matters. Lived experience matters. One of the best ways to learn about a person is to hear (or read) their story in context.

The objectives of building character through action are core to our mission at Culver, where we educate students for leadership and responsible citizenship in society by developing and nurturing the whole individual—mind, spirit, and body—through integrated programs that emphasize the cultivation of character. Culver’s core values are forged in bronze in the middle of campus: Duty, Honor, Truth, and Service. These values are the foundation of the Academy and are intentionally lived and taught through our student life structure, both in the classroom and on our athletic fields. Put directly, character is ingrained in everything we do at Culver—where leadership and citizenship are taught, studied, and explored in every facet of campus life.

Academically, leadership and citizenship are instilled through a series of required courses—Living, Learning, and Leading—where, since 2005, students are introduced to and work with Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson’s VIA Character Strengths, take a deep dive into Carol Dweck’s “Growth Mindset,” Angela Duckworth’s construct of “Grit,” and Anders Ericson’s work on deliberate practice to learn about these concepts and how to start to put them into practice to manage their wellbeing and set SMART goals. These lessons are reinforced in our Sophomore Leadership Workshop by deepening students’ understanding of our schools and school culture, exposing students to core leadership concepts and challenging practices, and affording them space to continue to intentionally develop their character.

One example of past work includes applying Design Thinking to improve aspects of the student experience. In Grade 11, Ethics: Virtues and Character Education, introduces students to the concept of “moral leadership”—a balance between legitimate authority and the virtues that form the Culver Leadership culture (wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice). Coursework stresses the application of critical thinking, dilemma resolution, and ethical decision-making in the context of active leadership. All of our students’ academic studies of leadership culminate with a Senior Leadership Reflection where they partner with a leadership mentor to reflect on and document what they

have learned at Culver in three areas—responsible citizenship, leadership, and community building—drawing on experiences from across their time at our school.

Beyond these academic requirements, student life includes a robust complementary curriculum supporting our students as they develop their character in our learning laboratories—classes, dormitories, athletics, clubs, stages, and academic competitions—for example, Model UN, Robotics, and Competitive Speech. We also encourage and support students to take on extracurricular challenges like those offered by the Voyager Outward Bound School, which complements and operationalizes the Culver Academies’ character mission in a focused manner. Our students returned to campus exercising clearer language, stronger habits, and further developed relational leadership skills. At the roundtable hosted by Voyager Outward Bound, students discussed their learning and offered their own perspectives on the purpose of the course.



**Experiences reveal
character in meaningful
ways, leading to individual and
community growth.**

— *Dave Bonner, Director of College Advising, Culver Academy*

Our students emphasized themes of teamwork, leadership shaped by relationships, perseverance, and durability under pressure (aka resilience). There was a moral tone to their reflections that emphasized compassion as critical to helping their team work towards shared goals and the value of kindness. In their responses, students spoke about performance in terms of interpersonal qualities that enable a well-functioning team, campus, or community. A phrase that stuck with me was that throughout the experience, participants noted getting to better know “who they are,” not simply by what they know. In an era where doing is sometimes confused with being, I found this notable.

ANN DUFFY, PH.D., PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT, EDUCATION FIRST AND CHARACTER FOCUS INITIATIVE

The Character Focus Initiative (CFI) is a field-learning effort and program housed within the [National Association for College Admission Counseling's \(NACAC\) Center for Innovation in College Admission](#). The initiative was formed following NACAC's 2023 acquisition of the Character Collaborative, a volunteer organization and learning community composed of admission leaders, practitioners, and researchers. Today, CFI focuses on advancing field learning through research, advocacy, and education—seeking to develop practical resources and best practices for identifying and considering non-academic character skills in college admission. CFI operates on the core belief that advancing the evaluation of these character attributes is essential to promoting a more equitable and holistic review process.



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— Ann Duffy, *Character Focus Initiative*

While K-12 schools, employers, and youth organizations deeply value character development, the admission field currently lacks a shared framework to evaluate it. CFI's perspective is that colleges must translate commonly cited outcomes—like teamwork, initiative, and resilience—into clear, “admission-readable evidence,” or clear evidence of student mindsets and skills that can be easily understood by admission officers. At the same time, CFI grapples with the equity implications baked into a review of these student skills, seeking to ensure that consideration of character attributes does not inadvertently advantage students who already possess high social capital and access to opportunities.

The reflections from Meg Peterson and Stephanie Hull strongly resonate with this mission. Peterson's emphasis on cross-sector collaboration perfectly aligns with CFI's belief that partnering with youth organizations provides “ready-made frameworks” to evaluate character skills, thereby widening the pipeline for historically underrepresented students to access higher education. Furthermore, Dr. Hull's powerful assertion that character is often forged in adversity—and her challenge to higher education to recognize this resilience as a measurable outcome—mirrors CFI's vision. This aligns with CFI's vision. Admission processes must intentionally value the problem-solving skills developed by marginalized students in their daily lives, rather than just rewarding traditional academic privilege.

Dave Bonner rightly emphasizes that “context matters” and “lived experience matters”, asserting that character is best understood and revealed through a person's story in context. This foundational idea—that experiences shape character—is central to CFI's mission. Whether character is developed through Culver Academy's robust learning laboratories, leadership courses, and mentorships or through the perseverance and resilience forged in the adversity described by others, the critical challenge for the admission field is to ensure that character is recognized and valued across all lived experiences. Building on Bonner's framing, CFI's perspective is that the field must build tools that assess character equitably, ensuring that students who develop these skills outside of formal, well-funded programs are recognized just as clearly, thereby preventing character from becoming another metric that wealthy families can simply “game” or package.

Looking ahead, the critical next step for the field is to bridge the translation gap among K-12 systems, employers, youth organizations, and higher education. While educators across sectors value character, the signals they use (e.g. personal interviews, letters of recommendation, or extracurricular activities) are not always aligned. Rather than adding burdensome new systems, the field should aspire to translate existing authentic student artifacts—such as capstone projects, community service, or substantial family responsibilities—into clear, “admission-readable evidence”. Colleges must align their

admission criteria with their distinct institutional missions, utilizing transparent, bias-reducing rubrics to interpret these experiences equitably during a holistic review.

Advancing character assessment will require deliberate cross-sector collaboration. Higher education institutions and youth development organizations must create shared forums to connect, align missions, and exchange best practices. Some of the most promising breakthroughs will likely emerge by observing how local districts, community colleges, and employers are already building authentic assessments that value student context and growth without relying on expensive platforms. By supporting collaborative pilot sites that pair K-12 schools with youth-serving organizations, the field can co-design and refine holistic admission tools that are both scalable and trustworthy.

Ultimately, any future pathways must be rigorously pressure-tested to safeguard equity and navigate the complex political and legal climate surrounding college admission. Schools and colleges must work together to set ethical expectations that reduce harmful achievement pressure and instead focus on a student's daily acts of character. By developing unified

CONCLUSION

We conclude as we began with the simple phrase, “Character matters.” Throughout this article, we demonstrated why and how that statement is put into action. It began with a collaboration between two organizations: a research-focused organization, E3n, and a youth development organization, Outward Bound. Theory and practice came together to present how character skills interventions like those given by Outward Bound can influence personal development. The preliminary quantitative results—showing increases in skills like resilience, self-control, and teamwork—provide empirical support for the powerful assertions made by leaders across the field: that character is developed through challenge and lived experience, and that it serves as a critical protective factor for students.

While the research and analyses are preliminary, the most important contribution of this work is how organizations with different objectives, but similar character fueled purpose, can effectively collaborate. Through such partnerships we build



Partnering with youth organizations provides

“ready-made frameworks” to evaluate character skills, thereby widening the pipeline for historically underrepresented students.

— Ann Duffy, *Character Focus Initiative*

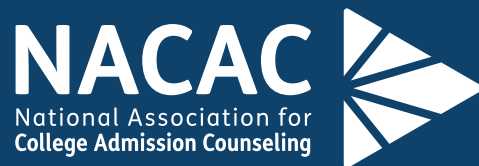
communication strategies, the broader education community can confidently discuss virtues and character assessment while avoiding political polarization. This is the foundation of the Character Focus Initiative's shared vision: to ensure that authentic evidence of a student's character can securely and fairly be considered, establishing character not as a proxy for privilege, but as a crucial pillar of transparency, fairness, and true equity in admission.

character-focused community. That did not stop at the end of this research, rather it was a catalyst in bringing together diverse perspectives presented in this article. The synergy between the statistical findings and the qualitative collaboration leadership perspectives forms the essential framework for the Character Focus Initiative's next steps: establishing a method for the fair, equitable, and beneficial assessment of character in college admissions.

By building a community of shared purpose, as we have begun to do here, we also build the foundation for establishing a mission. Character has long been held as important, but only recently has it reached a tipping point as a consideration in admission. Through continued collaboration and community building we can ensure that character is incorporated into the admission processes. We build, together, the framework for ensuring it is done in a fair, equitable, and beneficial way.

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