

History

The “Character Movement” and the Institute on Character and Admission

A 2013 TED Talk by Angela Duckworth went viral in business and education. Schools began to do more to foster character education. Books on character by Duckworth and David Brooks were NY Times best-sellers.

In recent years, the college admission process has been called into question due to a combination of factors:

- stress from the complexities and demands of the admission process itself
- stress from striving to get admitted to one of a small group of highly selective colleges (as well as a small group of highly selective independent schools)
- stress from high tuition, incurring unwanted debt, and an unreliable job market
- a perceived over-reliance on cognitive-based admission tests (ignoring a holistic view)
- a sense among many that the high levels of depression and suicide among high school and college students are due, at least in part, to a flawed admission process
- a sense among students that the “real me” is lost in the admission process and in the criteria used to evaluate one’s candidacy

Influenced by these developments, various admission-related initiatives (e.g., test-optional project, the Common App), and writing such as a 2015 article by David Holmes in the *Journal of College Admission* (“Overdue Revolution: Character Strengths in the Admission Equation”), a number of educators began to discuss how they could elevate the role of character in admission. Toward this end, a newly-formed Institute on Character and Admission convened in September 2016 before the NACAC national conference in Columbus, Ohio.

The first gathering included 55 leaders of college admission, college counseling, standardized testing, research and reform projects, independent secondary schools, national educational associations, etc. With (1) common concern about the admission process for colleges as well as secondary schools and (2) an overriding desire to elevate character in education, admission and society, the group agreed unanimously to continue as an entity and to “signal” to a national audience the importance of character in admission. Since this time, Institute members have spoken at numerous national and regional conferences about character in admission.

Since 2016, the group — now called the Character Collaborative — has met annually before the NACAC national conference and grown to 75 institutional members and 40 individual members. Annual dues underwrite the cost of the annual meeting, gatherings of task forces, member presentations at national meetings, institutional support, and development of materials and tools. Recent developments are described in the “Emergence of the Character Collaborative.”

In June 2018, the Institute's advisory board decided to change its name to the Character Collaborative, become a 501c3, establish a Board of Directors, and establish Executive Director and Board leadership positions of Treasurer and Secretary.

In addition, the group determined that it would pursue its mission through defined projects organized into working committees. The 7 committees of the Collaborative address these dimensions of the mission:

- character-based rubrics for use in the admission process
- instruments to assess character
- revised "package" of application materials with indicators of character strengths
- practitioners handbook for employing character in admission
- professional development of admission staff, college counselors, etc. for elevating character in admission
- strategies to advance access and equity for disadvantaged populations through character assessment
- refining the decision process in admission to incorporate character attributes

In pursuing its ambitious mission, the Collaborative recognizes the obstacles to systemic change in American education, including the highly diverse landscape of U.S. colleges and secondary schools, the competition among educational institutions for students and dollars, and the sharp sense of local ownership that educational leaders bring to their role. Acting together, however, is a dominant theme of the Collaborative's work. Looking ahead, the Collaborative's strategy for achieving "collective impact" includes these operating assumptions:

- Recognize that the college admission is an interconnected, but divided, national "system," involving schools, colleges, testing agencies, government agencies, parents, students, etc.
- Involve influential participants across the educational "silos" that influence admission.
- Collaborate with other organizations dedicated to admission reform
- Focus on a shared, concrete agenda with the potential of elevating character in admission.
- Add significantly to the Collaborative's membership, including public and private institutions.
- Ensure the time and creativity of members and dedicated time and leadership by a small staff.
- Raise sufficient funding to implement the Collaborative's mission (including the task force agendas) and support modest staffing.

Our Vision

A Better Future for American Youth and Our Nation

By elevating character attributes in the way students are educated and selected for educational opportunity, the ultimate goal of the Character Collaborative is to create – and document – a healthier, happier, more promising future for our youth. Specifically, we seek the following:

- A future society in which moral judgment, respect for others and social responsibility are more valued in leadership and citizenship.
- Personal attributes and skill sets of resilience, perseverance, collaboration and respect for others are more developed by our youth and demonstrated throughout society.
- Stress, anxiety and depression are reduced in young people.
- Admission, enrollment and completion rates are enhanced for under-served student populations.
- Our secondary and postsecondary institutions take greater responsibility for fostering social, emotional and character competencies among our youth.