

RESEARCH BRIEF

CHARACTER AND THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the Character Collaborative worked together to develop a survey of secondary school counselors and college admission offices. Survey questions were designed to better understand the nature of any character development programs offered by secondary schools in the US, and to establish a baseline for tracking trends in how positive character attributes are considered in college admission decisions. These surveys represent the first time NACAC has included questions about personal character.

The surveys were completed by 447 admission officers and 2,345 secondary school counselors. Details of the methodology can be found at the end of this report.

About the Organizations

NACAC, founded in 1937, is an organization of more than 15,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education. NACAC is committed to maintaining high standards that foster ethical and social responsibility among those involved in the transition process, as outlined in the association's *Code of Ethics and Professional Practices* (CEPP).

The Character Collaborative is a membership organization of some 75 colleges and secondary schools, researchers, professional associations, and counselors who think it critical that the character attributes of college applicants, aligned with institutional mission, are important in the college/school selection process and that admission deans should develop tools that would allow a consistent assessment of character as one factor in the admission process. Members believe that character is fundamental to an engaged life, the fullest consideration of human potential, and a humane society.

SURVEY RESULTS

College Admission Offices

The survey asked admission officers to indicate the level of importance given to various factors in admission decisions, including the role of positive character traits. Academic performance in high school, strength of the high school curriculum, and admission test scores rank as the most important factors in admission decisions, which has been true for decades. Positive character attributes rank with another set of factors, including essays, recommendations, and extracurricular activities, that are most often considered moderately important. About a quarter of the admission officers surveyed indicated that character attributes were considerably important in the selection process, while another 44 percent considered them to be moderately important in admission decisions.

All Factors in Admission	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in All Courses	74.5	15.0	5.5	5.0
Grades in College Prep Courses	73.2	16.8	5.9	4.1
Strength of Curriculum	62.1	21.9	8.7	7.3
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	45.7	37.1	12.2	5.0
Positive Character Attributes	25.9	44.4	13.9	15.7
Essay or Writing Sample	23.2	33.2	24.1	19.5
Student's Demonstrated Interest	16.1	23.9	28.0	32.1
Counselor Recommendation	15.1	40.4	26.6	17.9
Teacher Recommendation	14.2	40.2	26.5	19.2
Class Rank	9.1	29.1	34.1	27.7
Extracurricular Activities	6.4	42.9	32.0	18.7
Portfolio	6.4	11.9	26.9	54.8
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	5.5	18.3	35.2	41.1
Interview	5.5	16.4	28.3	49.8
Work Experience	4.1	28.6	36.9	30.4
State Graduation Exam Scores	2.3	8.7	18.8	70.2
SAT II Scores	1.9	5.6	14.8	77.8

Not surprisingly, private colleges rated character traits more highly than public colleges. On average, private institutions have fewer applicants,¹ which may allow for a more holistic review process that places additional emphasis on non-cognitive factors. Selective colleges (those accepting fewer than 50 percent of applicants) were much more likely to rate character attributes as considerably important than those institutions that were less selective. Highly selective institutions have many applicants with similarly high grades and test scores, and therefore tend to consider a broader range of factors, including positive character traits.

Positive Character Attributes	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
by School Type				
Public	16.7	27.8	19.4	36.1
Private	32.3	55.4	9.2	3.1
by Selectivity				
Fewer than 50 percent of applicants accepted	42.3	57.7	0.0	0.0
50 to 70 percent	15.2	45.5	24.2	15.2
More than 70 percent	17.9	41.0	15.4	25.6

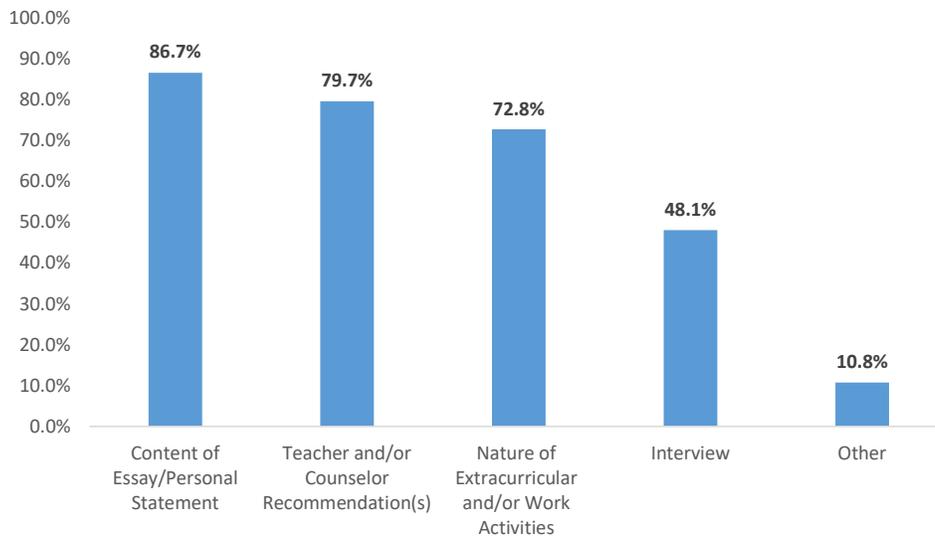
Chi-squared test for institution type ($X^2(3) = 24.9$), $p < .001$.

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) acceptance rate and importance of positive character attributes (-.394), $p < .01$.

Colleges also were asked to indicate, among a series of options, how assessments were made about the character attributes of applicants. Content of the essay/personal statement, teacher/counselor recommendations, and the nature of extracurricular activities and/or work experience were each common methods of assessment. It is interesting to note that these means of assessment rank similarly to positive character traits among all factors in admission, suggesting that demonstrating character is part of the inherent value of requiring essays, recommendations, and/or activities as part of the application. Fewer participants (48 percent) indicated that they used interviews to assess positive character attributes, likely because they are less often required or included as part of the application materials.

¹ Clinedinst, M. (2019). *State of College Admission*. National Association for College Admission Counseling, Arlington, VA.

Only 3 percent of respondents elected to provide alternate or additional methods they use to determine character in applicants, which included auditions, portfolio reviews, non-academic recommendations, and self-reported disciplinary records.



Secondary School Counselors

School counselors were asked to indicate whether their schools had a formal program designed to support the development of positive character traits in the student body. These data indicate that character programs are a component of the majority of secondary schools in the United States. Private schools, smaller schools, and those schools with lower student-to-counselor ratios were each more likely to have a formal character development program.

	Character Development Program (Percent Yes)
All Survey Respondents	58.1
by School Type	
Public	55.2
Private	75.8
by Enrollment	
Fewer than 500 students	61.7
501 to 999	58.4
1,000 to 1,499	56.3
1,500 to 1,999	45.6
2,000 or more	52.7
by Free and Reduced Lunch	
0 to 25% of students	65.3
26 to 50%	58.0
51 to 75%	50.1
76 to 100%	58.9
by Students per Counselor	
100 or fewer	71.5
101-200	60.5
201-300	56.5
301-400	52.3
401-500	54.7
More than 500	51.9

Chi-squared tests—institution type ($X^2(1) = 40.9, V = .144, p < .001$); enrollment size ($X^2(4) = 17.4, p < .01$); percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch ($X^2(3) = 21.9, p < .001$). Correlation (Spearman's Rho) between student-to-counselor ratio and character development program (.114, $p < .01$)

Survey respondents also indicated which school constituencies developed the character programs. Across all types of schools, the vast majority of programs were developed by personnel in the school, rather than by external organizations. Because these initiatives are designed by school personnel, it is likely that there is wide variation in both design and emphasis. Although programs developed at the district- or state-level were less common overall, they were more likely to be found at public schools. Larger schools also were more likely to have programs implemented at the district-level.

	School Personnel	District Administration	State Education Agency	Professional Education Association	Non-Profit Organization	Unsure
All Survey Respondents	74.6	31.5	8.2	9.7	15.8	9.8
by School Type						
Public	71.2	34.8	9.9	10.1	15.4	11.1
Private	89.8	16.6	0.5	7.8	17.6	3.9
by Free and Reduced Lunch						
0 to 25% of students	83.1	24.8	5.6	7.8	15.0	5.6
26 to 50%	70.2	33.6	8.3	9.4	17.4	9.4
51 to 75%	71.8	34.3	9.4	8.0	12.2	13.6
76 to 100%	71.7	33.5	10.7	14.6	18.0	12.4

Note: Shaded cells indicate no statistically significant differences were found.

Chi-squared tests for institution type and: school personnel ($X^2(1) = 30.4, V = .165$), $p < .001$; district administration ($X^2(1) = 25.7, V = .151$), $p < .001$; state education agency ($X^2(1) = 19.8, V = .133$), $p < .001$; unsure ($X^2(1) = 9.9, V = .094$), $p < .01$.

Chi-squared tests for percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and: school personnel ($X^2(3) = 17.4$), $p < .01$; district administration ($X^2(3) = 8.6$), $p < .05$; professional education association ($X^2(3) = 8.3$), $p < .05$; unsure ($X^2(3) = 11.7$), $p < .01$.

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) enrollment size and district administration (.120), $p < .01$.

Fewer than 40 percent of counselors reported that character development programs, as implemented in their schools, included assessment tools. The survey did not include questions about the format of the assessments or how they are used. Counselors at 61 percent of schools surveyed indicated that students were formally recognized for demonstrating positive character attributes.

	Assessment Tools (Percent Yes)
All Survey Respondents	37.6
by Enrollment	
Fewer than 500 students	41.7
501 to 999	37.3
1,000 to 1,499	32.1
1,500 to 1,999	22.5
2,000 or more	34.5
by Free and Reduced Lunch	
0 to 25% of students	32.8
26 to 50%	36.5
51 to 75%	38.5
76 to 100%	45.1
by Students per Counselor	
100 or fewer	51.9
101-200	38.5
201-300	37.5
301-400	30.0
401-500	27.4
More than 500	35.0

Chi-squared tests—enrollment size ($X^2(4) = 12.7$), $p < .05$; and percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch ($X^2(3) = 8.9$), $p < .05$.

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) between student-to-counselor ratio and character development program (.119), $p < .01$.

Implementation

Counselors were asked how character programs were implemented in their schools. Survey results indicate that schools with character education programs have infused them into the broader school curriculum to a large degree, both inside and outside of the classroom. The most common response was that character education was incorporated into existing coursework (69 percent), followed by separate classes or workshops held during the regular school day (46 percent), optional extracurricular activities (38 percent), and required extracurricular activities (18 percent). Each of these implementation methods was more common at private schools compared to public schools, with the most substantial difference being for required extracurricular activities (41 percent compared to 12 percent, respectively).

	Incorporated into Existing Classes	Stand-Alone Classes or Workshops	Extracurricular-Required	Extracurricular-Optional
All Survey Respondents	68.6	45.5	17.6	38.4
by School Type				
Public	67.6	42.7	12.2	36.5
Private	72.8	57.3	40.8	46.6
by Enrollment				
Fewer than 500 students	72.8	49.9	21.2	32.7
501 to 999	63.2	44.6	18.6	41.1
1,000 to 1,499	61.0	38.2	9.8	43.1
1,500 to 1,999	67.2	32.8	10.4	46.3
2,000 or more	72.6	41.7	9.5	52.4
by Free and Reduced Lunch				
0 to 25% of students	68.4	53.8	25.3	43.0
26 to 50%	64.8	39.8	14.2	37.7
51 to 75%	72.1	42.8	11.5	41.3
76 to 100%	71.3	43.9	16.1	31.4

Note: Shaded cells indicate no statistically significant differences were found.

Chi-squared tests for institution type and: stand-alone class/workshop ($X^2(1) = 14.2, V = .114$), $p < .001$; extracurricular, required ($X^2(1) = 93.5, V = .293$), $p < .001$; extracurricular, optional ($X^2(1) = 7.2, V = .081$), $p < .01$.

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) enrollment size and: existing classes (-.107); stand-alone classes (-.116); extracurricular, required (.117); extracurricular, optional (-.225), $p < .01$.

Chi-squared tests for percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and: stand-alone class/workshop ($X^2(3) = 13.8$), $p < .01$; extracurricular, required ($X^2(3) = 21.3$), $p < .001$; extracurricular, optional ($X^2(3) = 8.3$), $p < .05$.

CONCLUSION

Results of the survey questions developed jointly by NACAC and The Character Collaborative clearly indicate two things—that college admission officers care about students' character attributes when making decisions about who to admit; and that secondary schools are taking deliberate and formalized approaches to foster the development of positive personal traits beyond the cognitive domain.

The primary goal of this first attempt to gather information about character and college admission was to ascertain the prevalence and nature of character development programs in secondary schools, as well as the extent to which colleges valued positive character attributes among prospective students. As such, the work leaves important questions for further research and expert deliberations. For example, although the survey results documented that a high percentage of secondary schools have formal character development programs in place, it also indicated that the content and implementation of the programs are likely highly variable. The nature of the survey also did not allow us to ascertain the efficacy of the various approaches.

Survey results indicated that college admission officers who considered character to be important for admission decisions most often used applicants' essays or personal statements to make these judgments. However, the survey approach limited our ability to understand in more detail how application readers identify and assess positive character traits based on these materials.

The current level of understanding of various issues related to positive character traits—including how to assess them in a way that is valid and free from bias—presents obstacles for students and college counselors aiming to present information about character attributes in college application materials as well as for the college admission staff reviewing that information.

Looking ahead, with the answers to these and other important unanswered questions, we can begin to develop the tools and training that would help admission officers determine if and how to consider character in the evaluation of student applications.

ABOUT THE SURVEYS

Counseling Trends Survey (CTS)

In May 2019, NACAC distributed the 2018–19 Counseling Trends Survey to a school counseling office staff member at 15,997 secondary schools serving students through 12th grade. The list of counselors was purchased from MDR Education. The survey was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Responses were collected through June 2019.

NACAC received 2,345 responses to the survey. The following table provides a comparison of the characteristics of CTS respondents to those of all public and private secondary schools in the US (serving students through 12th grade). Survey respondents were 85 percent public, 6 percent private non-parochial, and 10 percent private parochial, making the sample slightly over-representative of public schools and under-representative of private, parochial schools. Among public schools, CTS respondents served a greater percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. NACAC survey respondents reported larger enrollments compared to all secondary schools.

NACAC 2018–19 Counseling Trends Survey Sample Compared to the National Secondary School¹ Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Schools	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Schools	NACAC Private Non-Parochial Respondents	All Private Non-Parochial Schools	NACAC Private Parochial Respondents	All Private Parochial Schools
N	2,345	33,062	1,191	26,579	130	1,996	224	4,487
% of Schools			84.9	80.4	5.5	6.0	9.6	13.4
Total Enrollment								
Mean Enrollment	840	548	904	615	489	225	473	300
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility								
Percent of Students	49.1	—	54.7	44.1	12.7	—	18.1	—

¹ All schools that include grade 12.

—Not available for private schools.

SOURCES: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2018-19.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey", 2016-17 v.2a, 2017-18 v.1a.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Private School Universe Survey (PSS)", 2015-16.

Admission Trends Survey (ATS)

For the 2018-19 administration of the Admission Trends Survey, the questionnaire was divided into two parts—one set of questions was sent to university admission offices and another set to institutional research (IR) offices. Both portions were administered online using SurveyMonkey. The IR portion of the survey was e-mailed in March 2019 to 1,069 IR contacts at four-year postsecondary institutions that were members of NACAC. In August 2019, the admission office portion of the survey was sent to all 1,263 NACAC-member four-year colleges. Admission offices also were asked to provide additional data if the IR portion had not been submitted. At the time of the survey, NACAC member institutions represented 78 percent of all four-year nonprofit, baccalaureate degree-granting, Title IV-participating institutions in the US that serve first-time freshmen and are not open admission. Colleges that meet these criteria represent the type of institutions that the survey is designed to include. NACAC received 447 responses, for an overall response rate of 35 percent. Of the 447 responses, 326 institutions submitted completed surveys (both admission and IR sections) and 121 submitted just the IR portion. All responses were utilized in the analyses.

As shown in the following table, ATS respondents had slightly lower acceptance rates compared to all colleges, and private college respondents had lower yield rates when compared to the national average. Survey respondents also had larger undergraduate enrollments.

NACAC 2018–19 Admission Trends Survey Sample Compared to National College Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Colleges	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Colleges	NACAC Private Respondents	All Private Colleges
N (%)	447	1,611	169 (38%)	531 (33%)	278 (62%)	1,238 (68%)
Total Full-Time Undergraduate Enrollment						
Mean Enrollment	6,787	5,263	13,225	10,671	2,750	2,594
Selectivity and Yield (Percent)						
Mean Selectivity	64.2	66.7	67.7	70.3	62.1	64.9
Mean Yield	27.8	33.7	33.2	33.4	24.6	33.9

NOTE: Data for all colleges was drawn from the 2017-18 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) using the following criteria: US location; four-year, not-for-profit; baccalaureate degree-granting; Title IV-participating; enrolls full-time first-time freshmen; not open admission.

SOURCES: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018-19.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017-18). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.