



**Turning the Tide**  
Inspiring Concern for Others and the  
Common Good through College Admissions

CREATED BY MAKING CARING COMMON,  
A PROJECT OF THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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In addition, *Turning the Tide* is supported by the Board of Directors of the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, and by the Great Lakes Colleges Association. Endorsing this report signifies general agreement with the report and its recommendations, not necessarily agreement with every specific point and recommendation. Visit [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org) for additional endorsers.

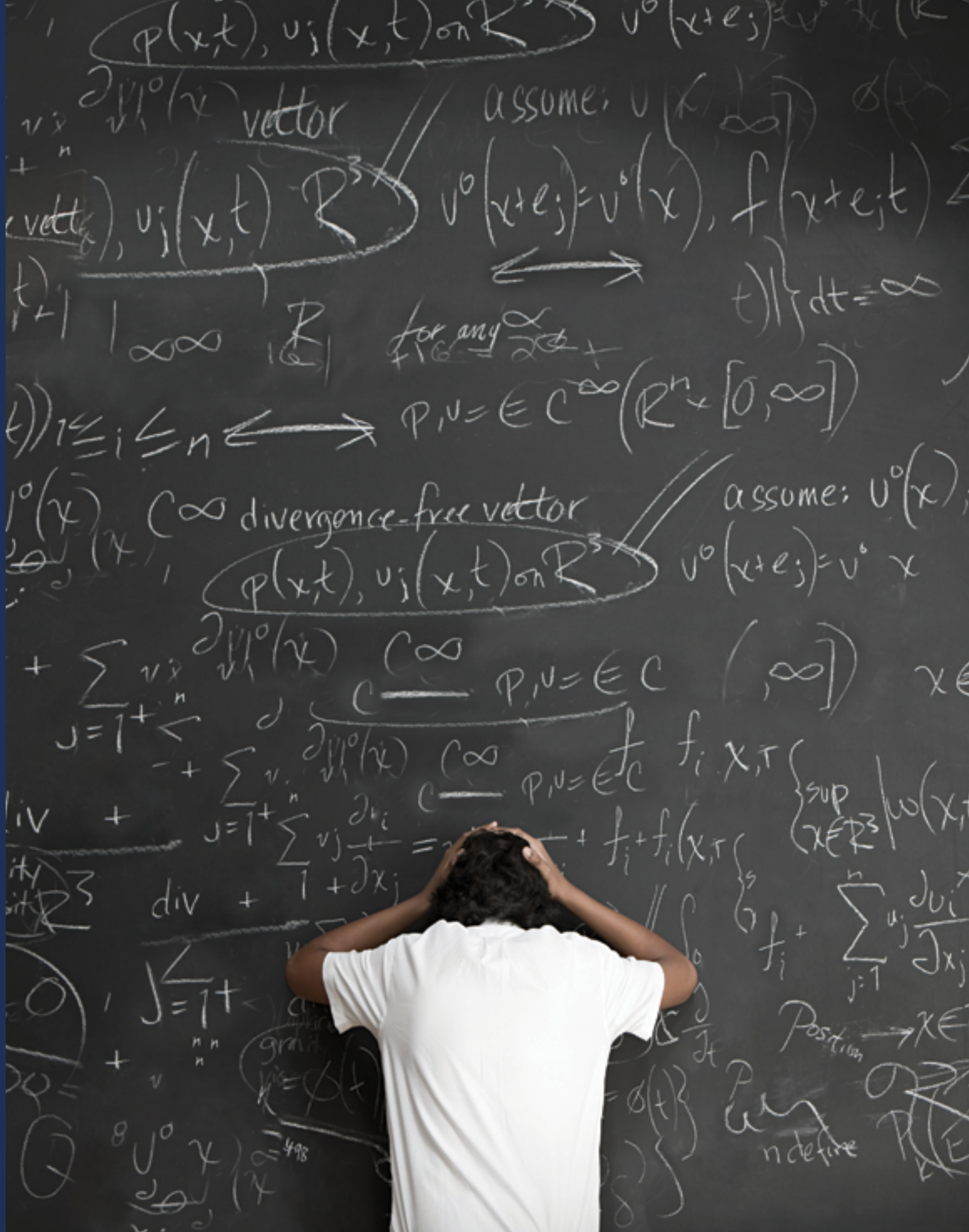


This report stems from an exploratory meeting hosted by the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Participants included college admissions officers, university administrators, school guidance counselors and principals, character education experts, individuals representing national organizations of school guidance counselors, admission professionals, and independent schools as well as other key stakeholders. The purpose of the meeting was to consider how to improve the role of the college admissions process in promoting and assessing ethical and intellectual engagement. The recommendations here emerged from that meeting and have been revised in subsequent conversations with admissions deans. A list of those who have endorsed this report is included at the end of this document and online at [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org). Several of these endorsers have already made changes in their admissions materials or practices as the result of this report. Making Caring Common, in collaboration with the Education Conservancy, will work with college admissions officers and other key stakeholders—including parents, high school guidance counselors, and high school and college administrators—over the next two years to far more widely implement the report recommendations.

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# Executive Summary

**T**oo often, today's culture sends young people messages that emphasize personal success rather than concern for others and the common good (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Putnam, 2005; Putnam, 2014; Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). And too often the college admissions process—a process that involves admissions offices, guidance counselors, parents and many other stakeholders—contributes to this problem. As a rite of passage for many students and a major focus for many parents, the college admissions process is powerfully positioned to send different messages that help young people become more generous and humane in ways that benefit not only society but students themselves. Yet high school students often perceive colleges as simply valuing their achievements, not their responsibility for others and their communities. While some colleges have diligently sought to convey to applicants the importance of concern for others and the common good, many other colleges have not. The messages that colleges do send about concern for others are commonly drowned out by the power and frequency of messages from parents and the larger culture emphasizing individual achievement. Further, even when students and parents receive the message that contributions and service to others do count, they often seek to “game” service.

This report advances a new, widely shared vision of college admissions that seeks to respond to this deeply concerning problem. It makes the case that college admissions can send compelling messages that both ethical engagement—especially concern for others and the common good—and intellectual engagement are highly important. Colleges can powerfully collaborate to send different messages to high school students about what colleges value. This report, endorsed by over 80 key stakeholders in college admissions, represents such a collaboration.

More specifically, this report takes up three challenges. First, it describes how college admissions can motivate high school students to contribute to others and their communities in more authentic and meaningful ways that promote in them genuine investment in the collective good and deeper understanding of and respect for others, especially those different from them in background and character. Second, it demonstrates how the admissions process can more accurately and meaningfully assess young people's contributions to others and their communities, especially students who vary widely by race, culture and class.

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College admissions can send compelling messages that both ethical engagement—especially concern for others and the common good—and intellectual engagement are highly important.

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Promoting ethical and intellectual development via college admissions requires taking up two other related goals. In some communities students suffer from a lack of academic resources and opportunities. In other communities pervasive pressure to perform academically at high levels and to enter selective colleges takes an emotional toll on students and often squeezes out the time and energy students have to consider and contribute to others. A healthy and fair admissions process cannot simply encourage students to devote more time to others: It needs simultaneously to reward those who demonstrate true citizenship, deflate undue academic performance pressure and redefine achievement in ways that create greater equity and access for economically diverse students.

The following report offers specific recommendations for reshaping the admissions process in each of the following three areas:

**1** Promoting more meaningful contributions to others, community service and engagement with the public good.

**2** Assessing students' ethical engagement and contributions to others in ways that reflect varying types of family and community contributions across race, culture and class.

**3** Redefining achievement in ways that both level the playing field for economically diverse students and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

*For a fuller discussion of each of these recommendations, including suggestions for specific changes in application essay questions and recommendations, please see the full report. Additional resources are available at [www.makingcaringcommon.org](http://www.makingcaringcommon.org).*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE

The admissions process should both clearly signal that concern for others and the common good are highly valued in admissions and describe what kinds of service, contributions and engagement are most likely to lead to responsible work, caring relationships and ethical citizenship.



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## Recommendation #1: Meaningful, Sustained Community Service

We recommend that students engage in forms of service that are authentically chosen—that emerge from a student’s particular passions and interests—that are consistent and well-structured, and that provide opportunity for reflection both individually and with peers and adults. **We also recommend that students undertake at least a year of sustained service or community engagement (see below for description of “community engagement”). This service can take the form of substantial and sustained contributions to one’s family, such as working outside the home to provide needed income.** Just as important, it’s vital that the admissions process squarely challenges misconceptions about what types of service are valued in admissions. Some students seek to “game” service by taking up high-profile or exotic forms of community service, sometimes in faraway places, that have little meaning to them but appear to demonstrate their entrepreneurial spirit and leadership. **The admissions process should clearly convey that what counts is not whether service occurred locally or in some distant place or whether students were leaders, but whether students immersed themselves in an experience and the emotional and ethical awareness and skills generated by that experience.**

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## Recommendation #2: Collective Action that Takes on Community Challenges

While individual service can be valuable, we also encourage young people to consider various forms of community engagement, including working in groups on community problems, whether the problem is a local park that needs attention, bullying in their schools or

communities or some form of environmental degradation. These types of activities can help young people develop key emotional and ethical capacities, including problem-solving skills and group awareness, as well as greater understanding of and investment in the common good.

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## Recommendation #3: Authentic, Meaningful Experiences with Diversity

We encourage students to undertake community service and engagement that deepens their appreciation of diversity. Too often, current forms of service are patronizing to recipients and don’t spark in those providing service a deeper understanding of social structures and inequalities. Rather than students “doing for” students from different backgrounds, for example, we encourage students to “do with”—to work in diverse groups for sustained periods of time on school and community challenges, groups in which students learn from one another. Importantly, these experiences of diversity should be carefully constructed and facilitated.

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## Recommendation #4: Service that Develops Gratitude and a Sense of Responsibility for the Future

We encourage students to take up forms of community engagement, service and reflection that help them appreciate the contributions of the generations before them—how their lives are built on the service of others—and their responsibility to their descendants. Working within a tradition, whether religious or secular, such as 4H clubs, can help generate this kind of gratitude and responsibility.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSING ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHERS ACROSS RACE, CULTURE AND CLASS

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### **Recommendation #1: Contributions to One's Family**

The admissions process should clearly send the message to students, parents and other caregivers that not only community engagement and service, but also students' family contributions, such as caring for younger siblings, taking on major household duties or working outside the home to provide needed income, are highly valued in the admissions process. Far too often there is a perception that high-profile, brief forms of service tend to count in admissions, while these far more consistent, demanding, and deeper family contributions are overlooked. Students should have clear opportunities to report these family contributions on their applications.

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### **Recommendation #2: Assessing Students' Daily Awareness of and Contributions to Others**

The admissions process should seek to assess more effectively whether students are ethically responsible and concerned for others and their communities in their daily lives. The nature of students' day-to-day conduct should be weighed more heavily in admissions than the nature of students' stints of service.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING UNDUE ACHIEVEMENT PRESSURE, REDEFINING ACHIEVEMENT, AND LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR ECONOMICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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### Recommendation #1: Prioritizing Quality—Not Quantity—of Activities

Admissions offices should send a clear message that numerous extracurricular activities or long “brag sheets” do not increase students’ chances of admission.

**Applications should state plainly that students should feel no pressure to report more than two or three substantive extracurricular activities and should discourage students from reporting activities that have not been meaningful to them.** Applications should provide room to list perhaps no more than four activities or should simply ask students to describe two or three meaningful activities narratively. Applications should underscore the importance of the quality and not the quantity of students’ extracurricular activities. Admissions offices should define students’ potential for achievement in terms of the depth of students’ intellectual and ethical engagement and potential.

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### Recommendation #2: Awareness of Overloading on AP/IB Courses

Admissions offices should convey to students that simply taking large numbers of AP or IB courses per year is often not as valuable as sustained achievement in a limited number of areas. While some students can benefit from and handle large numbers of AP/IB courses, many students benefit from taking smaller numbers of advanced courses. Too often there is the perception that these students are penalized in the admissions process.

At the same time, it’s vital to increase access to advanced courses for large numbers of students in schools without access to adequately challenging courses.

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### Recommendation #3: Discouraging “Overcoaching”

Admissions offices should warn students and parents that applications that are “overcoached” can jeopardize desired admission outcomes. Admissions officers, guidance counselors and other stakeholders should remind parents and students that authenticity, confidence, and honesty are best reflected in the student’s original voice. Admission officers should consider inviting students (and families) to reflect on the ethical challenges they faced during the application process.

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### Recommendation #4: Options for Reducing Test Pressure

Admissions offices should work to relieve undue pressure associated with admission tests (SAT and ACT). Options for reducing this pressure include: making these tests optional, clearly describing to applicants how much these tests actually “count” and how they are considered in the admissions process, and discouraging students from taking an admissions test more than twice. Colleges should tell students that taking the test more than twice is very unlikely to meaningfully improve students’ scores. Colleges should also be asked to justify the use of admissions tests by providing data that indicates how scores are related to academic performance at their particular institution.

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## Recommendation #5: Expanding Students' Thinking about “Good” Colleges

Admissions officers and guidance counselors should challenge the misconception that there are only a handful of excellent colleges and that only a handful of colleges create networks that are vital to job success. It is incumbent upon parents to challenge this misconception as well. There is a broad range of excellent colleges across the country, and students who attend these colleges are commonly successful later in life in the full array of professions. There are many paths to professional success, and students and parents should be far more concerned with whether a college is a good fit for a student than how high status it is.

Finally, we are keenly aware that reforming college admissions is only one piece of a far larger challenge. Ultimately, we cannot bring about a sea change in the messages our culture sends to young people unless educational institutions at every level elevate and embody a healthier set of values. While this change needs to start or accelerate from multiple points, we view our recommendations as one powerful place to begin. In the face of deeply troubling trends that only seem to be worsening, it is time to say “Enough.”

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Admissions officers and guidance counselors should challenge the misconception that there are only a handful of excellent colleges and that only a handful of colleges create networks that are vital to job success.

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Report



# Introduction

**A**ny healthy society depends on citizens who are concerned about others and the common good. Yet research suggests that we are not preparing large numbers of youth to create this kind of society. Too often, today’s culture sends young people messages that emphasize personal success rather than investment in others or our collective future (Konrath et al., 2011; Putnam, 2005; Putnam, 2014; Weissbourd & Jones, 2014).

How might we strengthen this commitment to others and the common good in young people? While there is no single answer, college admissions can play a key role. Admissions processes inevitably send messages about what colleges value, messages that young people may interpret as signals of what society values as well. Collectively, colleges spend a huge sum each year sending signals that influence the behavior of millions of students. These messages can exacerbate young people’s sometimes singular focus on achievement or, alternatively, motivate behaviors that are likely to develop in them a greater commitment to others and the common good. Some colleges have sought diligently to communicate the importance of this commitment in the admissions process, but too often these messages are overwhelmed by messages from the larger culture and from parents that narrowly emphasize academic performance and personal success. Many other colleges fail to send messages to applicants emphasizing commitment to others and the common good.

Currently, college admissions could—and should—do more to generate positive changes in young people’s ethical commitments. In fact, it seems that most high school students interpret colleges as being narrowly focused on their achievements—expressed, for example, in test scores, grades and numerous impressive extracurricular activities—not on their sense of responsibility for others or their communities. Many other students are receiving the message that service to others does count, but they’ve embraced notions of service that provide little benefit to themselves or others. Other students are simply trying to “game” service.

How might we construct an admissions process that sends compelling messages that both academic achievement and commitment to others and the common good are highly important? How might we construct a process

that motivates young people to contribute to others and their communities in ways that are more authentic and meaningful and that promote in them greater appreciation of and commitment to others, especially those different from them in background and character? How might we increase young people’s understanding of and commitment to the public good? Just as important, how might the admissions process assess young people’s contributions to others and their communities in ways that are more valid and meaningful, especially students varying widely by race, culture and class?

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**Too often, today’s culture sends young people messages that emphasize personal success rather than investment in others or our collective future.**

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The following is the first of a series of reports intended to both strengthen the role of the admissions process in promoting and assessing ethical engagement in students and to achieve greater fairness and integrity in the admissions process. This first report is focused primarily on how college admissions might best promote and assess key aspects of both ethical engagement—especially students’ ability to take other perspectives and their commitments to others and the common good—and intellectual engagement. College admissions needs to send clear signals to students and parents early in high school that these commitments are at the heart of preparing for responsible work, caring relationships and informed and ethical citizenship. Further, college admissions officers, guidance counselors and other stakeholders should provide guidance to young people about what kinds of experiences are likely to develop in them ethical awareness and commitments.

We also recommend key strategies for alleviating excessive academic performance pressure and for redefining achievement itself. In so doing, we seek to respond to two problems. First, in many communities students struggle with a lack of academic resources and opportunities. Second, in other communities, pressure to perform academically at high levels and to enter selective colleges has serious emotional costs for students and often depletes the time and energy students have to focus on and contribute to others. Academic performance becomes not one important theme, but the theme in the large composition of a life.

A healthy and fair admissions process cannot simply encourage students to devote more time to others: It needs to simultaneously reward those who demonstrate true citizenship, deflate undue academic performance pressure and redefine achievement so that it is both more meaningful and helps level the playing field for economically diverse students.

**WE THUS OFFER RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE FOLLOWING THREE AREAS:**

**1** Promoting more meaningful contributions to others, community service and engagement with the public good.

**2** Assessing students' ethical engagement and contributions to others in ways that reflect varying types of family and community contributions across race, culture and class.

**3** Redefining achievement in ways that both level the playing field for economically diverse students and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

Two final caveats: First, this report is not suggesting that admissions offices should promote a particular moral or political ideology. It is suggesting that the admissions process can counteract a narrow focus on personal success and promote in young people greater appreciation of others and the common good.

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Ultimately, we cannot bring about a sea change in the messages our culture sends to young people unless educational institutions at every level elevate and embody a healthier set of values.

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Second, we recognize that these recommendations only address pieces of a complex problem. Reshaping college admissions needs to be coupled with more purposeful, intensive and wiser efforts across our culture, at home, and at every level of education, including colleges themselves to develop in young people deeper commitments to others. Colleges themselves tend to be far less deliberate and active about cultivating ethical character in students today than they have been throughout our history (Lagemann & Lewis, 2012). Attention to ethical character is often scant in both residential life and curricula and too few administrators and faculty see their role as ethical stewards. While reforming college admissions can lead to more ethically aware and committed college students, these gains won't be fully realized unless colleges themselves pay more serious attention to cultivating students' ethical character. Ultimately, we cannot bring about a sea change in the messages our culture sends to young people unless educational institutions at every level elevate and embody a healthier set of values. This process of change needs to start or accelerate from multiple points. We believe that our recommendations are one powerful place to begin.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE AND ENGAGEMENT

### Recommendation #1: Meaningful, Sustained Community Service

A good deal of research suggests the characteristics of community service that are likely to develop empathy, altruism, and other key emotional and ethical capacities in young people. Community service is more likely to promote these capacities when it is authentically chosen—when it emerges from a student’s particular passions and interests—when it is consistent, well-structured and sustained, and when it provides opportunity for reflection both individually and with peers and adults (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Metz & Youniss, 2005). Whether service should be voluntary or mandatory is widely debated. Yet research suggests that the benefits of service are determined not by whether it is required, but by whether it is high-quality, (i.e., whether it has these characteristics). Required service often has significant ethical benefits (Hart et al., 2007; Metz & Youniss, 2005).

The admissions process should convey to high schools the importance of creating these kinds of high quality service experiences while seeking to unearth the degree to which service has, in fact, engaged students’ concerns and intellect and developed in them important awareness of and commitment to others and the public good. Admissions might assess whether service has, for example, enhanced students’ understanding of their own ethical strengths, flaws, and blind spots, generated in them greater humility, or deepened their understanding and respect for those who are vulnerable or simply different from them. It might seek evidence of whether service has developed in students a more incisive understanding of the workings of society and of the sources of social problems. It might assess whether service has stirred in young people deeper questions about justice and emboldened them to challenge injustice.

While it can certainly be constructive for students to try out many kinds of service in the course of their high school career, we urge students to commit for at least a year to one activity. Sustained service is significantly more likely than brief service to generate deeper reflection, to develop in students key emotional and ethical capacities and to have greater impact on others. For many types of students and for most students, sustained service also appears to be a significant predictor of college success (Sedlacek, 2011).

**This service can also take the form of sustained community engagement, as described below, or the form of contributions to one’s family, such as working outside the home to provide needed income.**

At the same time, it’s vital that the admissions process challenges misconceptions about what types of service “count.” Many students who can afford it seek high-profile or exotic forms of community service to demonstrate their entrepreneurial spirit and leadership, sometimes taking up service in faraway places. To be sure, these experiences are meaningful and even transformative for some students. Yet the admissions process should convey that admissions officers are alert to service that appears inauthentic or trumped up. Further, what should matter in admissions is not whether service occurred locally or in some distant place but students’ willingness to immerse themselves in an experience and the emotional and ethical awareness and commitments this generates. And while student leadership can reflect one form of contribution, the admissions process should clearly indicate that colleges value the widely varying ways students can contribute to others and the common good.

Many students will struggle to access high quality community service and civic engagement opportunities or face other obstacles to committing to service. It’s important that applications give students opportunities to describe these obstacles and that admissions offices consider these obstacles in assessing candidates. Admissions officers might also join with other stakeholders in more effectively identifying and facilitating connections with high quality and sustained opportunities for students within a variety of high-quality local and national organizations.



**Finally, we recognize that we cannot prevent some students from “gaming” community service. But in valuing sustained and high-quality forms of service we can increase the likelihood that what students “game” will have considerably more benefit than it currently does for a large number of students.**

Guidance counselors, admissions officers and other stakeholders can also send a strong message that college admissions officers are far more alert to “gaming” than is commonly perceived.

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Applications should not just ask students about the number and type of their service or community engagement activities, but about their significant and demanding family contributions, longest period of service, why they chose this service/activity, what they learned from their experience and how they may have changed as a result.

### **Sample application questions:**

- *“Define what you mean by community (neighborhood, family or extended family, religious affiliation, etc.) and explain both why and how you have contributed to a community.”*
- *“Explore what you learned from a community service activity or consider what you learned from other efforts you’ve undertaken to contribute to your community/communities. What did you learn about yourself, about your community, about community in general? What, if anything, did you learn about how society functions more generally?” “What questions do you have as a result of this engagement?” “If you have engaged in substantial activities to support your family, such as employment or caring for a sick relative, you might reflect on what you’ve learned from these activities.”*
- *“What kind of community/communities do you want to develop or join as part of your college experience? Why? What do you see yourself as bringing to these community/communities?”*

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN APPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Students should be encouraged to provide a recommendation from someone who can assess their contributions during their period of service. This person could be, for example, a supervisor, a recipient of a service, a peer or a teacher. Recommenders should be asked to assess what applicants learned and how they might have changed as a result of community service or engagement.

## Recommendation #2: Collective Action that Takes on Community Challenges

While volunteering in a soup kitchen or nursing home can certainly be a valuable experience, other forms of community engagement can be just as valuable. We encourage young people to consider, for example, working in groups on community problems, whether the problem is a local park that is dangerous, bullying in their schools or communities, a high teen pregnancy rate or some form of environmental degradation. Students might begin these projects by conducting research. These types of activities can develop in young people important emotional and ethical skills, including problem-solving and group skills, that are required for many jobs in the modern economy and that are important in many other aspects of their lives. These activities can also deepen students' understanding of and commitment to our civic life.

Activities outside of school such as arts, sports, religious or political activities—conducted at the local, state, national or international level—are also valued by colleges. These activities should also count as community engagement if students can demonstrate in applications how these activities involved contributions to others and helped them become more aware of others and committed to their communities.

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Personal essay questions should prompt students to not simply reflect on service but on community engagement more broadly.

### Sample application questions:

- *“How do you imagine you might contribute to your college community and/or other communities during college? Your actions might describe individual service, such as volunteering in a local homeless shelter. But they might also describe many other types of contributions, for example, working on an initiative to prevent sexual harassment, a religious activity, contributing to residential life or collectively seeking solutions to an environmental challenge. Why might you make these contributions? What would motivate you?”*

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## Recommendation #3: Authentic, Meaningful Experiences with Diversity

Too often students' experiences with diversity, including their service experiences, are brief and token and can be patronizing to recipients. This service commonly doesn't increase young people's understanding of and respect for those who are disadvantaged or different from them, or spark in young people reflection on the causes of and solutions to societal challenges.

The college admissions process should encourage other types of community engagement that are likely to generate deeper appreciation of diversity and greater social awareness and insight. Rather than students "doing for" those from different backgrounds, for example, we encourage students to "do with"—to work in diverse groups for sustained periods of time on community challenges, groups in which students learn from one another while working towards a common goal. We also encourage students to work in groups that are diverse in terms of gender, religious and political orientation and other characteristics. These types of diverse, collective experiences are not only important in generating deeper forms of respect in young people; they are also more likely to help develop knowledge and skills vital to working and interacting in diverse groups in an increasingly interconnected world. Greater understanding of multiple perspectives is also key to understanding the common good. When students live in areas of the country with little diversity, they might consider working in diverse groups virtually.

It's crucial that these experiences of diversity are carefully constructed and facilitated. Deep appreciation and understanding of others is not simply a function of proximity or a common task. In fact, constructed or facilitated poorly, diverse groups may reinforce divisions and stereotypes.

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS

### Personal essay question:

- *"Explore what you learned about yourself, about the functioning of your community and/or about the workings of society based on an experience you have had working with or interacting with others who are different from you in terms of race, class, culture, political orientation, or other characteristics."*

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN APPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommenders might be asked to consider whether students are able to work effectively and sensitively with those who are different from them in background or other characteristics.

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## Recommendation #4: Service that Develops Gratitude and a Sense of Responsibility for the Future

We encourage students to take up forms of service and reflection that help them appreciate the contributions of the generations before them—how their lives are built on the service of others—and their responsibility to their descendants. Gratitude is a powerful ethical emotion—appreciating what one has is deeply tied to appreciating what others don't have. Working within a tradition, whether religious or secular—such as 4H clubs—can help generate this kind of gratitude and responsibility. Other types of activities, such as working on an environmental challenge, can charge students with responsibility for the future.

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS

When asked about their contributions/service, students might be asked to reflect on whether and how their contributions are tied to the contributions of previous generations and how these contributions might influence future generations.

### Sample questions:

- *“Reflect on one or more aspects of your life that are built on the contributions of previous generations. Why did you choose these particular contributions? Do you feel that you ‘owe’ these ancestors? If so, what do you owe? How might you want to contribute to the lives of future generations and what motivates you to contribute in this way?”*



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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSING ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHERS ACROSS RACE, CULTURE AND CLASS

### **Recommendation #1: Contributions to One's Family**

Many students in low- and modest-income and working-class communities are often contributing vitally to others in ways that are not measured by traditional forms of community service. These students may be caring for a sick relative, supervising a younger sibling, helping to run a household or working after school to support their families. Often students can't undertake conventional high school extracurricular activities and community involvement because of these important obligations. At the same time, these family responsibilities themselves are often building blocks of ethical character. Too often, in fact, students and parents believe that high-profile forms of service that are unlikely to build ethical character count in admissions while these more demanding and significant family contributions do not. Often these contributions also aren't inquired about in the admissions process. Even when admissions offices send the message that these contributions are valued, students may not know where to discuss these contributions on their application.

The admissions process should clearly send the message to students, parents and other caregivers that these types of family contributions are highly valued in admissions and provide clear opportunities for applicants to discuss them.



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## Recommendation #2: Assessing Students' Daily Awareness of and Contributions to Others

Orienting oneself around others and the common good is certainly not simply a matter of formal acts of service. Admissions offices should continually seek to better assess whether students are kind, generous, honest, fair and attuned to those who are struggling in their daily lives. How fair and honest, for example, are students in their daily interactions? How frequently and how far does a student's concern extend beyond themselves or a small circle of people similar to them?

While recommendations sometimes capture these qualities in students, often recommendations heavily focus on academic abilities. Recommendations are also often uniformly glowing and inflated, simply stringing together superlatives about students; recommenders aren't required to be discerning about applicants' ethical concerns and commitments. In addition to the changes in the application process, we suggest it's vital that high school guidance counselors, teachers and other stakeholders convey the message that how students conduct their daily lives is critically important in admissions and remind students and parents that recommenders will be asked to reflect on students' daily conduct.

We also encourage admissions offices to pilot and evaluate various strategies for assessing and weighting ethical engagement, sharing the results widely. How, for example, do those students admitted because more weight is given to their ethical engagement fare in college, according to a variety of academic, emotional and social measures, compared to other students?

## RECOMMENDED CHANGES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS

**Personal essay question:** Applications might ask students to reflect broadly on how they contribute to others and on what values guide their lives.

### Sample questions:

- *“Do you think of yourself as a ‘good’ person? Do you think other people are generally ‘good’? How do you define ‘good’? What makes a ‘good’ person?”*
- *“Explain what values are most important to you and why.”*

## SUGGESTED CHANGES IN APPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommenders should supply specific, concrete examples of concern for and contributions to others. Recommenders might describe, for instance, how specifically a student contributes to a classroom, a school or a community, a specific act of moral courage or a time when a student showed an exemplary understanding of fairness.

We suggest recommendations include choices. In addition to describing narratively applicants' academic abilities and character, recommenders might be encouraged, for example, to provide three adjectives that best describe a student, or to choose among a list of adjectives, only some of which reflect ethical character, such as “kind” or “fair.” Whether or not recommenders selected adjectives with ethical content would be one factor in assessing candidates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING UNDUE ACHIEVEMENT PRESSURE, REDEFINING ACHIEVEMENT, AND LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR ECONOMICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

Academic challenges clearly vary across different types of communities. In many communities, students lack access to key academic opportunities and resources. Students may lack access, for example, to AP courses and to important extracurricular activities that can build academic and other skills. It's vital that the admissions process consider this lack of access and opportunity in assessing students and not create a threshold for academic activities and courses that some students will not be able to cross.

On the other hand, in many middle- and upper-income communities, students are overloading on AP courses and extracurricular activities and fierce pressure to attend high status colleges is taking a large emotional and ethical toll. Rates of depression, delinquency, substance abuse and anxiety, for example, appear to be considerably higher in these communities than in the general population of adolescents and research suggests that achievement pressure is a significant cause (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The intense focus on personal achievement can also crowd out concern about others and the common good. The admissions process should not only elevate the importance of ethical engagement; it should seek to deflate this undue academic performance pressure.

The following recommendations seek to both strengthen the prospects of economically diverse students and to decelerate the excessive academic performance pressure that can be destructive to students in better off schools.

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### **Recommendation #1: Prioritizing Quality—Not Quantity—of Activities**

Admissions offices should clearly indicate that numerous extracurricular activities or long “brag sheets” do not increase students’ chances of admission. Applications should state plainly both that students should feel no pressure to note more than two or three substantive extracurricular activities and that students should focus on the qualitative aspects of their participation. Applications should discourage students from reporting activities that have not been meaningful to them and provide room to list perhaps no more than four activities or to describe two or three meaningful activities narratively. Admissions offices should define students’ potential for achievement in terms of the depth of their intellectual and ethical engagement and potential, not in terms of the number of their accomplishments. If students want to note more than three activities, they should make clear that these additional activities are lower priorities for them.

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### **Recommendation #2: Awareness of Overloading on AP/IB Courses**

Admissions offices should convey to students that taking large numbers of AP or IB courses per year is often not as valuable as sustained achievement in a limited number of areas. While many students lack access to AP courses, some students are overloading on AP courses. Some students taking numerous AP courses and other advanced courses in a single year, to be sure, can benefit from this course load and these students should not be viewed unfavorably in admissions. Others may find their academic and personal development jeopardized by taking a course load for which they are not prepared. Admissions offices should encourage students to take courses that



are appropriate for their academic development and emphasize that taking large numbers of AP, IB, honors, or college courses is not right for everyone. Even the most advanced students may benefit from avoiding course “overload” and devoting more time for scholarly work that allows unstructured reflection and encourages the development of intellectual curiosity.

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### **Recommendation #3: Discouraging “Overcoaching”**

Students and families should consider a number of issues in obtaining outside help with applications, coaching, and test prep. Admissions offices should discourage students and parents from seeking inappropriate help to prepare applications and warn students that applications that are “overcoached” can be transparent and detrimental to admission. It’s crucial for students to understand that originality and authenticity are aspects of character that colleges look for and view favorably. Admission officers should consider inviting students (and families) to reflect on the ethical challenges they faced during the application process. For example, typical presentations to prospective students and parents about applying to college could include a section addressing relevant ethical issues. The college application could include an essay question asking the student to describe and discuss the ethical challenges they experienced during the college application process.

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### **Recommendation #4: Options for Reducing Test Pressure**

Admissions offices and other stakeholders should work together to reduce unfair advantages and reduce undue pressure associated with admission tests (SAT and ACT). Options for reducing this pressure include: making these tests optional, clearly describing to applicants how much these tests “count” and how they are considered in the admissions process, and discouraging students from taking an admissions test more than twice. Colleges and testing companies should convey that taking the test more than twice is very unlikely to significantly improve students’ scores. Colleges should provide data that validate how scores are related to academic performance at their particular institution.

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### **Recommendation #5: Expanding Students’ Thinking about “Good” Colleges**

Admissions officers and guidance counselors and other stakeholders should challenge the misconception that there are only a handful of excellent colleges and that only a handful of colleges create networks that are vital to job success. It is incumbent on parents to underline this misconception as well. There is a broad range of excellent colleges across the country, and students who attend these colleges are commonly successful later in life in the full array of professions. There are many roads to Rome, and students and parents should be far more concerned with whether a college is an appropriate match for students than how high its status it is.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, we certainly do not expect all college admissions officers, high school guidance counselors or other stakeholders to wholly embrace these recommendations. Our hope, in fact, is that college admissions officers will take up some of these recommendations and improve on others. What we are convinced of is that far too often colleges, high schools and parents are placing more and more pressure on young people to focus on personal success at the expense of others and our common goals. And we are concerned that too often colleges, high schools and parents are competing—engaging in an “arms race”—that is costly both to young people and to our society. Fighting these problems and this contagion will require many individual acts of courage and discipline on the part of admissions officers, guidance counselors, students and their parents. But it will also require collective action. It will require those involved in admissions to band together with others to hold up, expect and honor in young people a more ethical and meaningful way of leading a life, to create a healthier balance in young people between their self-concerns and their investment in others and the larger world. Our hope is that this report will be part of many conversations, partnerships and widely-shared agreements that move us closer to this vital goal.



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# Appendix

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