Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission

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MAKING CARING COMMON PROJECT

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission

It is important for admission offices to define the specific character skills they value when evaluating and selecting applicants. A lack of a clear definition (and a lack of examples of what a skill looks like in an application) invites bias by admission readers and can lead to unreliable or uneven implementation of criteria.

The following is a collection of definitions of commonly assessed non-cognitive skills. The goal of these documents is to provide a starting place for colleges interested in defining such skills in the admission process.

Compassion. Curiosity. Gratitude. Grit. Growth Mindset. Perspective-Taking. Purpose. Self-Control.

Each skill-focused document contains:

1. A simple definition

2. A rationale for the use of the skill and its connection to outcomes

3. Additional information about the skill

4. Examples of how the skill might present in an application

5. Source information and additional reading

You will find embedded citations and sources for the first three items. Examples of how the skill might appear in an application were developed by our team in collaboration with several college admission colleagues and educators. These are intended to be just that—examples. Individual colleges will doubtlessly provide their own examples based on the skills most important to them and the process of evaluation they employ.

The list of terms and skills included in this guide is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. We chose these skills as a starting point, based on informal data from colleges about what they value in applicants. Some terms necessarily overlap with other terms. There are certainly more skills that admission offices can assess and we encourage colleges to add to the list and to share their work with us (collegeadmissions@makingcaringcommon.org) so that we may disseminate it to others. Finally, the information included in these documents is not comprehensive; the research base for many of these skills is vast and complex. These definition documents are jumping-off points, a place and a way to begin.

Compassion

From research

Compassion is concern for the welfare of others that is evoked by perceiving another individual as struggling or in need (Goetz et al., 2010). Compassion may include the resulting motivation within a person to do something to relieve another individual's suffering (The Greater Good Science Center [Greater Good], n.d.).

Why compassion?

People who are compassionate may be able to better foster relationships with others who can provide reciprocal support (Cosley et al., 2010). This shared support can lead to stronger emotional connections between individuals and compassionate acts towards others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Research shows that college students who demonstrate compassion and thus show a higher level of concern for their peers and classmates display increased levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Cosley et al., 2010). Compassion has been linked to improved health and increased resilience (Compassionate Action Network, n.d.).

More information

Research indicates that compassion is related to but different from both empathy and altruism. Empathy allows an individual to take the perspective and feel the emotions of another individual. Compassion is closely linked to empathy, but empathy, as traditionally defined, does not necessarily indicate the desire to help others (Greater Good, n.d.). Altruism is selfless prosocial behavior that is sometimes, but not always, instigated by feelings of compassion (Compassionate Action Network, n.d.).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants who are concerned for the needs of others and attempt to relieve those needs. Applicants might express compassion in "big" ways (e.g., organizing a fundraiser to support those who are victims of a natural disaster) or "small," everyday ways (e.g., supporting their peers with their day-to-day challenges). It is relatively easy to show compassion for those that are like you (and easier to empathize with); true compassion for those that are seen as "different" or "unlike" the applicant is far less common and very important.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant volunteers in an elderly home consistently over the course of a year. They spend their time talking with patients about their experiences, playing games, and helping them do basic tasks like organizing items in their rooms. The student's application materials suggest a strong understanding of the difficulties that elderly individuals often encounter, empathy for their struggles, and a subsequent passion for improving the lives of this population.

2. Based on activities (family contributions)

An applicant has limited extracurricular activities, largely due to the fact that they must take care of their two younger siblings after school because their parent must work extra jobs to provide for the family. Rather than express contempt or anger at their circumstance or parent, the applicant's application materials suggest that they have an enormous amount of compassion for their parent, who manages several difficult jobs, gets little sleep, and tries their best. The applicant might suggest through the application materials the feelings of their parent and younger sibling and how they attempt to make things easier for their family.

3. Based on a personal statement

An applicant's personal statement suggests that they have compassion for a student that is often targeted at their school by others for their conservative political beliefs. The applicant goes out of their way to understand the other student's views (even though it is not their own) and to identify things they have in common with their peer, even when it is difficult. Beyond understanding the conservative student's perspective, the applicant describes how they suspect the student feels and what they have tried to do to alleviate the situation (e.g., offering the student a safe place to speak, finding commonalities, trying to improve the climate of the school so that is more welcoming to those of diverse beliefs, etc.).

4. Based on a letter of recommendation

An applicant's letters of recommendation suggest that they demonstrate compassion consistently and reliably in their everyday reactions with their peers. A teacher or counselor might note that the applicant frequently shows genuine care for their classmates and goes out of their way to check in with peers who appear to be struggling, perhaps by stopping to listen to others' problems or by attempting to help them solve those problems (e.g., tutoring them, mediating personal struggles, etc.).

References/Additional Reading:

Compassionate Action Network. (n.d.). The science of compassion. https://www.compassionateactionnetwork.org/science-of-compassion.

Cosley, B. J., McCoy, S., Saslow, L. R., & Epel, E. S. (2010). Is compassion for others stress buffering? Consequences of compassion and social support for physiological reactivity to stress. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(5), 816-823. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.04.008

Crocker, J., & Canevello, A. (2008). Creating and undermining social support in communal relationships: The role of compassionate and self-image goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(3), 555-575. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.3.555

Goetz, J., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2010). Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(3), 351-374. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018807

The Greater Good Science Center (n.d.). Compassion Definition: What is compassion. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition.

Compassion is concern for the welfare of others that is evoked by perceiving another individual as struggling or in need.

Quick Definition of Compassion | Goetz et al., 2010

Curiosity

From research

Curiosity is the desire to learn and understand new things and how they work (Litman, 2008).

Why curiosity?

Research shows that curiosity is linked to overall high levels of psychological well-being. This includes decreased levels of anxiety, increased fulfillment from life, and more positive emotions (Campbell, 2015). Curious people often demonstrate higher levels of interest and enjoyment in learning, increased academic achievement, and better performance at work (Campbell, 2015). Additionally, curiosity is associated with the development of empathy and stronger relationships with others; it can lead individuals to talk with or inquire about others who may be different from them in various facets of life including social groups, experiences, and opinions (Campbell, 2015).

More information

Curiosity is a broad term; most relevant to education is epistemic curiosity, or "the desire for knowledge that motivates individuals to learn new ideas, eliminate information-gaps, and solve intellectual problems" (Litman, 2008, p. 1586). It is also referred to as the "drive to know" (Von Stumm et al., 2011). Epistemic curiosity can be divided into both interest and deprivation forms. Interest-based curiosity refers to curiosity around discovering new ideas, positive feelings, and a "take it or leave it" approach to information. By contrast, deprivation based curiosity is associated with closing specific knowledge-gaps, negative feelings, and a "need to know" approach to information (Litman, 2005).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants demonstrate a strong interest in learning more, feeling more, or experiencing more about themselves, the world, or others. They may articulate a desire to better understand the unknown or to seek and solve specific problems. Curiosity may also be manifested in an applicant's desire to learn about others, experience new things, and build relationships with new people.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant is very involved over time in one or more activities that suggests their interest in learning new things, which can be commonplace or profound. This could include enthusiastic membership in a robotics club where students explore solutions to complicated design problems, membership in a cultural exchange group to learn more about people with different backgrounds, or participation in a variety of new clubs and sports to learn more about new hobbies, ideas, and people. A student might be involved in a research project outside of school or may intentionally seek out an opportunity to shadow a professional in a field in which they are interested.

2. Based on a personal statement

An applicant's personal essay suggests their desire to learn more about another person's point of view or way of life—this could be a person from a different country, culture, or religious background. The applicant's essay underscores their strong, genuine desire to learn more about this other person/place/experience, and explores related questions the applicant wishes to pursue.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

Recommenders refer to an applicant as extremely interested in learning more about the world, experiences, or other people. A recommender might offer examples from the classroom where the applicant constantly asks probing, intellectual questions related to course content, does research on their own to solve problems or flesh out answers, and seeks to understand and reflect upon the experiences and points of view of others. A teacher might talk about an independent study project that a student pursued beyond the prescribed curriculum or the way they connected disparate topics in an unique manner.

References/Additional Reading:

Campbell, E. (2015, September 24). Six surprising benefits of curiosity. The Greater Good Science Center. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_surprising_benefits_of_curiosity
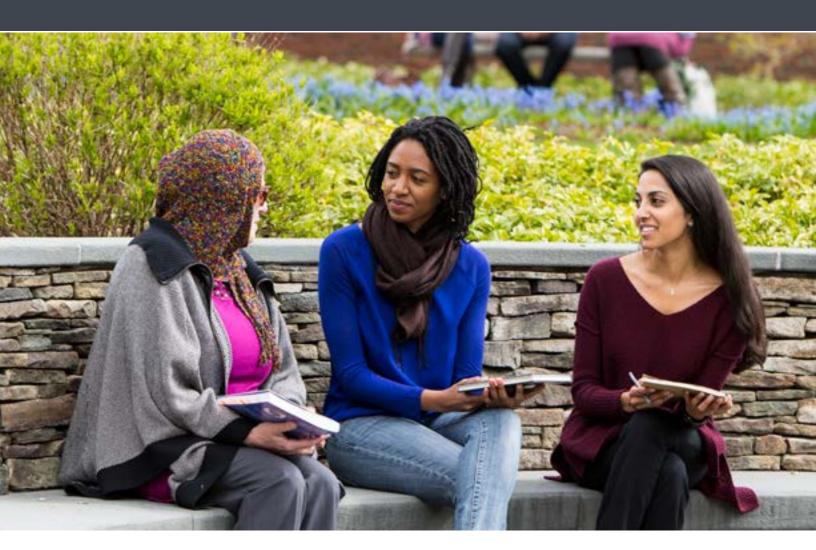
Litman, J. (2005). Curiosity and the pleasures of learning: Wanting and liking new information. *Cognition & Emotion*, 19(6), 793-814. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930541000101

Litman, J. (2008). Interest and deprivation factors of epistemic curiosity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 44(7), 1585-1595. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2008.01.014

Von Stumm, S., Hell, B., & Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2011). The hungry mind: Intellectual curiosity is the third pillar of academic performance. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(6), 574-588. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691611421204

Curiosity is the desire to learn and understand new things and how they work.

Quick Definition of Curiosity | Litman, 2008

Gratitude

From research

Gratitude is the positive feeling of appreciation when another person has purposely given something of value (McCullough et al., 2001).

Why gratitude?

Research shows that those who feel and express gratitude are more likely to be happier, cope well with adverse experiences, develop and maintain positive relationships, and be healthier overall (Emmons, 2010). People who demonstrate gratitude regularly are generally more optimistic in all aspects of their lives and are also known to exercise more (Harvard Health Publishing, n.d.). With regard to interpersonal relationships, research indicates that those who regularly express gratitude to a friend, family member, or partner, typically feel more positive toward others and better able to communicate any concerns about the relationship with that person (Harvard Health Publishing, n.d.). In social settings, demonstrating gratitude regularly leads to increased compassion and generosity while also resulting in lower feelings of loneliness and isolation (Emmons, 2010).

More information

Gratitude is an appreciation for what a person is given. This can be either something tangible or intangible. When a person displays gratitude, they are recognizing the goodwill in their lives that is outside of themselves. Expressing gratitude enables people to develop a connection with something bigger than themselves while also strengthening relationships with others by recognizing and appreciating the support we have been given by other people. Research shows that gratitude can encourage and motivate reciprocal prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants demonstrate thankfulness or appreciation for those in their lives who have given to them, either physical things, time, and support, or for opportunities they have been afforded, allowing them to get to where they are now.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant is very involved in a group or event focused on showing appreciation for the contributions of others (e.g., veterans or teachers within the school). More than just "showing up" for the event or group, the applicant demonstrates that their gratitude is long-term and consistent (involvement in an event or group over time). The applicant takes care in their application materials to describe the contributions others have made and why the applicant is personally grateful for them.

2. Based on a personal statement

In an essay, an applicant talks about their use of a gratitude journal or another consistent practice of gratitude in their life. The applicant may describe a frequent subject of their gratitude and what that person/group's contribution has meant to them or others. The applicant might also discuss how the practice of gratitude has affected them.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

Recommenders refer to an applicant as one who demonstrates gratitude consistently and reliably in their interactions with others. For example, a teacher recommender might share how the applicant regularly expresses their thanks and gratitude for the teacher's support during and after class. The teacher might indicate that the applicant is someone who consistently displays appreciation for the contributions of friends and classmates.

References/Additional Reading:

Bartlett, M.Y., & DeSteno, D. (2006). Gratitude and prosocial behavior: Helping when it costs you. *Psychological Science*, 17(4), 319-25.

Emmons, R. (2010, November 16). Why gratitude Is good. The Greater Good Science Center.

Harvard Health Publishing. (n.d.). Giving thanks can make you happier. Harvard Medical School. https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier.

McCullough, M., Kilpatrick, S., Emmons, R., & Larson, D. (2001). Is Gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(2), 249-266. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.2.249

The Greater Good Science Center. (n.d.). Gratitude Definition: What Is gratitude. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good.

Grit

From research

Grit can be defined as "passion and perseverance for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Why grit?

Grit may be a more reliable predictor of success and high achievement than I.Q. and talent (Duckworth et al., 2007). Students with greater diligence are more likely to graduate from high school and have higher GPAs (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Research indicates that without grit, talent may not be developed, and may simply be left as unrealized potential (Duckworth et al., 2007).

More information

Grit encompasses working vigorously toward challenging tasks or projects while remaining diligent and energetic despite adversity and failures. Those who are high in grit set long-term objectives for themselves and maintain their energy and passion towards these goals over the course of years. They do not change directions, even during times when they are not being praised for their work or goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Gritty individuals do not need positive feedback or encouragement to continue working on the goals they set out for themselves. Grit level is not an indicator of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Duckworth et al., 2007).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants who may have set long-term objectives and goals for themselves and show growth and achievement related to those goals, despite facing substantial adversity or challenges. Applicants may have overcome obstacles or setbacks to meet (specific or broad) goals, yet remain passionate and invested.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant started a youth group that is focused on combating anxiety and depression within their community. The applicant started this club early in high school and has built the group over three years to accomplish their goal of increasing awareness and openness about mental health challenges and providing research-based resources to students in their school. The student's application materials suggest their passion for this topic and show the substantial challenges the student has overcome (e.g., funding, faculty support, limited capacity, etc.) to help the group meet its goals. The student's application materials suggest that the student will continue to advocate for mental health issues in college—despite the move to a new, bigger setting.

2. Based on a personal statement

An applicant writes their personal statement about achieving their goal of getting good grades in math, despite a learning difference that has made math more difficult for them since grade three. The applicant speaks to their desire to improve their math skills so they can go to college and do STEAM-related work. The essay indicates that the applicant's passion for the goal has stayed strong and consistent, despite facing consistent challenges in math. The essay may allude to how the applicant has overcome those challenges (e.g., by putting in extra hours with teachers, teaching themselves new strategies for learning, etc.).

3. Based on a personal statement

An applicant writes their personal statement about achieving their goal of maintaining a "B" average in school and staying connected to their school community despite having substantial home responsibilities. The applicant's essay indicates that they have needed to stay home with their younger sibling everyday after school and on the weekends because their mom needs to work multiple jobs to support the family. The applicant's essay shows that this challenge has not deterred them; they have remained enthusiastic about their goal and have managed to find alternative ways to connect to other school members (perhaps by joining a club that meets online) and have achieved good grades by squeezing in study time while their sibling sleeps.

4. Based on a letter of recommendation

An applicant's letters of recommendation indicates that the applicant has set the goal of being the first one in their family to attend college; the applicant has worked hard and remained enthusiastic about college despite substantial personal or academic challenges (e.g., a lack of family support, limited advanced courses offered at their high school, etc.). The letter articulates how the applicant has sought college as a major goal over several years, and how the student has remained passionate about college and maintained solid grades, social relationships, and involvement in activities in order to meet this goal.

References/Additional Reading:

Duckworth, A., & Browne, C. H. (2019, October 27). Grit. Character Lab.https://characterlab.org/playbooks/grit/

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087

Eskreis-Winkler, L., Duckworth, A. L., Shulman, E., & Beal, S. (2014). The grit effect: Predicting retention in the military, the workplace, school and marriage. *Frontiers in Psychology: Personality Science and Individual Differences*, 5(36), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00036

Growth Mindset

From research

A growth mindset is the belief that intelligence and talents can advance through perseverance and dedication (Dweck, 2016).

Why growth mindset?

Research shows that people who possess a growth mindset are learning-focused (Dweck, 2012). These people consistently utilize approaches and put in the effort necessary to gain knowledge and succeed through the most challenging situations (Dweck, 2014). In academic settings, students who believe that they can increase their intelligence and improve by working hard often put in a high level of effort, which can lead to increased achievement (Mindset Works, n.d.). Research shows that having a growth mindset in school is linked to increased academic achievement, in terms of both grades and test scores, as well as higher motivation (Dweck, 2014).

More information

"In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talents are just the starting point" (Dweck, 2012). A student with a fixed mindset who struggles with math may accept their poor math grades. They may justify these grades because they are "bad at math" instead of working hard to improve. A student with a growth mindset, however, might work hard to improve their math grades and increase their knowledge in the subject. Research indicates that all individuals are a combination of both fixed and growth mindsets (Dweck, 2016). An individual's balance between fixed and growth mindsets is constantly expanding and changing with experience. Those in a growth mindset shine in challenging situations and persevere through failure by learning from mistakes (Dweck, 2014).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants demonstrate their focus on learning to achieve success and to develop their abilities. They show their willingness to persevere and put in a high level of effort to improve despite challenging situations. This can be in and out of the classroom and might extend to growth in activities, social situations, new environments, etc.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant demonstrating a growth mindset may be someone who indicates that they find, or have found in the past, a particular sport to be especially challenging. The applicant may have spent several years playing this sport as part of a team or individually. The student's' application materials may suggest that the player continued to try hard to improve, always learning from constructive feedback, despite the fact that they lacked regular recognition. The applicant's application materials may describe how they continued to believe that they could improve with practice and dedication and may articulate the time they spent working towards this goal. A growth mindset may also be evident in an applicant's willingness to try new experiences such as the three season athlete who senior year tries out for the school musical.

2. Based on a personal statement

The applicant's personal statement suggests that they have persevered through a willingness to work hard to achieve goals. The applicant may describe a specific challenge that they faced in school, such as an academic course or concept that proved difficult to master. When faced with this challenge, the applicant describes not becoming distraught or deterred; rather, they describe their solutions (e.g., meeting with

classmates or the teacher to get additional support, conducting additional research, or brainstorming creative solutions to the problem, etc.). Applicants may also describe overcoming challenges related to non-academic pursuits including social interactions like collaborating with others or solving non-academic problems.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

An applicant's letter of recommendation might indicate that the student received constructive criticism (or a lower grade) in a course or on a project than expected and used this opportunity to improve; the applicant may have sought additional aid from the teacher, put in extra hours to master the challenging concept, or worked hard to recreate the project. Rather than express frustration with themself or the teacher, the student focused on the learning opportunity presented and poised themselves to learn from mistakes.

References/Additional Reading:

Dweck, C. (2012). *Mindset: How you can fulfill your potential*. Constable & Robinson.

Dweck, C. (2014). Teachers' mindsets: "Every student has something to teach me": Feeling overwhelmed? Where did your natural teaching talent go? Try pairing a growth mindset with reasonable goals, patience, and reflection instead. It's time to get gritty and be a better teacher. *Educational Horizons*, 93(2), 10-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013175X14561420

Dweck, C. (2016). What having a "growth mindset" actually means. Harvard Business Review, 13, 213-226.

Mindset Works. (n.d.) Decades of scientific research that started a growth mindset revolution. https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/

Perspective-Taking

From research

Perspective-taking is a person's ability to perceive another individual's point of view (Healey & Grossman, 2018).

Why perspective-taking?

Research indicates that being able to take on the perspective of another person can lead to positive interpersonal relationship development, prosocial behavior, and effective communication (Healey & Grossman, 2018). Perspective-taking can also inspire compassionate actions and increase "emotionally positive interactions" among individuals (Williams, 2011). Recognizing others' points of view can encourage interactions among people who may be part of different social groups, thus decreasing stereotyping and discrimination against certain groups (Williams, 2011).

More information

Perspective-taking can be further broken down into cognitive perspective-taking and affective perspective-taking. Cognitive perspective-taking can be defined as a person's capacity to interpret another individual's thoughts or beliefs (Healey & Grossman, 2018). Affective perspective-taking is a person's capacity to interpret another individual's feelings or emotions (Healey & Grossman, 2018). While both are considered to be perspective-taking, the difference between the two is that a person who is capable of affective perspective-taking can both perceive and take on the other person's emotions (Healey & Grossman, 2018). Having the ability to recognize and take another person's perspective is critical to developing positive relationships and engaging in prosocial behavior (Williams, 2011). It can also "lead people to value others' welfare, feel compassion for them, and engage in helpful, benevolent behavior" (Williams, 2011). Research indicates that perspective-taking decreases stereotyping, discrimination, and negative impressions of groups of individuals that may be different from one's own (Williams, 2011).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants demonstrate their ability to understand the views, thoughts, or feelings of others, including individuals and/or groups that are very different from them. Applicants demonstrate that their understanding of others' views or experiences have led them to be open-minded about perceived differences and, potentially, have allowed them to build bridges and unite different perspectives. Applicants that are strong in perspective-taking may demonstrate positive social relationships with others based on mutual respect and understanding, and may be motivated to be compassionate towards or helpful to others.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant volunteers at a sports league as a buddy for children with special needs. The applicant spends time talking to children, getting to know them, and helping them be successful in athletics. The applicant's application materials indicate that they subsequently have a strong understanding of the difficulties and challenges this population faces, an appreciation of their unique experiences, and demonstrate a desire to improve the lives of this population.

2. Based on a personal statement

An applicant writes about a friendship or experience that challenged their worldview or approach to a certain issue or belief. For example, a politically liberal applicant might write about a moment when they were able to look at a policy or social issue from a more conservative approach based on conversations that explored a peer's point of view.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

An applicant's letter of recommendation from a teacher indicates that the student goes out of their way in class to talk to and get to know other students who are different from them either demographically, socially, or in regards to opinions. The recommender's letter talks about how the student strives to make the classroom more inclusive of those with different backgrounds and opinions as a result of their ability to understand others' perspectives. A recommendation might also highlight a research project that a student engaged in that included interviews with individuals from different backgrounds or experiences.

References/Additional Reading:

Healey, M. L., & Grossman, M. (2018). Cognitive and affective perspective-taking: Evidence for shared and dissociable anatomical substrates. *Frontiers in Neurology*, 9, 491. https://doi.org/10.3389/fneur.2018.00491

Williams, M. (2011). Perspective taking. In G.M. Spreitzer, & K.S. Cameron (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734610.013.0035

Purpose

From research

Purpose can be defined as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self" (Damon, 2008).

Why purpose?

Purpose is associated with a person's ability to both identify and to act in response to causes or social issues about which they are passionate (Malin et al., 2017). In a school context, great academic purpose often results in increased academic performance (Malin et al., 2017). Research indicates that a sense of purpose also supports identity and goal formation in young people (Malin et al., 2017).

More information

Purpose is a deep-rooted, forward-looking aim that considers and is consequential to both the self and the world beyond the individual (Malin et al., 2017). In adolescence, a sense of purpose presents a framework for setting and achieving realistic long-term goals (Malin et al., 2017). People who have a sense of purpose typically have also developed a set of consistent values, which motivate them towards action. These values are fundamental to an individual's sense of self (Malin et al., 2017).

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants articulate how they are pursuing or thinking about medium- or long-term goals that are meaningful to them personally and provide value to the world beyond. Applicants can articulate why these goals are important to them, as well as important to other others/society, and they can articulate how their current and specific interests, activities, or learning is driven by, or a result of, these goals.

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant articulates their decision to enroll in childcare courses and/or work at a preschool throughout high school based on their love of children and desire to learn more about how early childcare can be improved in this country. The applicant may discuss why improving children's lives and opportunities is important to them personally, and how this learning will improve outcomes for children more broadly. The applicant identifies particular learning and opportunities that have supported these goals over time and their other application materials suggest that these activities and interests are likely to persist and grow in college.

2. Based on a personal statement

An applicant expresses interest in majoring in psychology with the overall goal of pursuing a career in social work in order to advocate for and support kids in the foster system. They may use their personal statement to indicate their desire and passion for the field itself (e.g., interest in studying the brain and emotion, a career focused on people, etc.), while recognizing the need for this sort of career and the potential impact it might make on children and communities in need. An applicant might write about an experience that they had, such as a summer job, internship, or class, that confirmed a specific interest, career path, or course of study.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

Recommenders discuss an applicant's sincere and continual interest in solving a larger problem or achieving long-term goals. The applicant's interests, activities, and learning are often related to these goals, and the recommendation identifies incidents when an applicant was able to articulate their goals and values.

References/Additional Reading:

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life.* Free Press.

Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Damon, W. (2017). Purpose and character development in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(6), 1200-1215. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0642-3

Self-Control

From research

Self-control can be defined as the ability of an individual to overcome their feelings, impulses and actions in order to accomplish longer-term goals (Psychology Today, n.d.). Willpower is considered to be one's ability to exercise self-control (Psychology Today, n.d.).

Why self-control?

Research suggests that high levels of self-control during childhood and teen years is linked to higher levels of self-regulatory skills throughout life (Gillebaart, 2018). Increased self-control is linked to life outcomes such as better health, stronger well-being, and increased happiness (Gillebaart, 2018). Self-control in adolescents is associated with higher academic performance including grades, standardized test scores, and attendance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Research shows that individuals who exhibit high levels of self-control during childhood and adolescence often have lower levels of alcohol/substance abuse, decreased involvement with crime, and increased financial stability (Moffitt et al., 2011). Self-control has also been connected to the development of higher quality interpersonal relationships (Gillebaart, 2018).

More information

The term self-control is often portrayed as a "now" versus "later" challenge (Rachlin, 1974); self-control can look like a person deciding between forgoing immediate pleasure in favor of another long-term option that may eventually provide them or others with increased satisfaction in the long-run.

From Making Caring Common

What you might look for in admission

Applicants demonstrate their ability to control impulses or postpone immediate gratification in order to pursue long-term goals or options. This may look like resisting distractions or impulses, or it may look like the ability to bounce back from challenging emotions or to plan ahead. Self-control can be primarily self-focused (e.g., a person who restrains from unhealthy foods for better health), but can also be other-focused (e.g., a person who refrains from checking their phone for the benefit of a group conversation or stops eating meat for the benefit of the planet).

Examples in applications

1. Based on activities

An applicant describes their involvement on a competitive team that requires very long hours and early/late practices. The student's application materials suggest the continual self-control required to maintain this schedule (e.g., limited late night social gatherings, early wake up times, strict dietary guidelines, many hours of independent practice instead of social time, etc.).

2. Based on a personal statement

An applicant describes their decision to abstain from drinking alcohol throughout high school. The applicant's essay touches on the social pressure to drink at social events, why drinking is not the right answer for them, how this decision relates to their future goals, and how they have exercised control in social situations where alcohol is present. A student might also describe a curricular choice that showed balance and self-regulation, such as choosing not to take all advanced courses or to only focus on areas of academic strength/interest.

3. Based on a letter of recommendation

Recommenders share that the applicant consistently models high levels of self-control when interacting with challenging peers or when receiving new instructions in class. For example, the recommender may describe how an applicant in a leadership position responds to peer complaints or challenging behaviors in the classroom; rather than get "riled up" by behaviors of others, the applicant focuses on the shared assignment or problem at hand and encourages the group to move on.

Definitions of Key Character/Non-Cognitive Terms and Skills for Use in Admission

References/Additional Reading:

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Access our full suite of character assessment in college admission resources: http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview

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