

College Admission Is Not a Personality Contest. Or Is It?

By Amy Harmon

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Documents showing that Harvard rated Asian-American applicants lower on personality traits than applicants of other races raise questions about how college admissions officers evaluate intangible criteria. What constitutes “likability” or “courage?” How do they know someone is “widely respected?”

Here’s what some education scholars and former admissions officers say about the use of personality traits in the admission process. Spoiler alert: It’s not a science.

What criteria are used to evaluate “soft” traits in college applicants?

The first thing to know is that only the most select colleges in the country perform what education experts call a “holistic admissions process” that tries to take personality traits into account, said Michael N. Bastedo, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Education.

Most schools look at grade point averages and standardized test scores and may also review letters of recommendation, college essays and extracurricular activities. Colleges that do consider personal qualities are highly variable in the traits they look at and how they are ranked. Nor are they interested in disclosing their criteria: “Once it becomes measured, it becomes gameable,” Dr. Bastedo said.

In the analysis of student records filed by a group representing Asian-American students in a lawsuit against Harvard, admissions officers discussed traits that included “positive personality,” kindness, courage and being “widely respected.” In a study of 10 unidentified schools commissioned by the College Board, traits included “emotional intelligence,” “self-efficacy” and creativity. Leadership, education experts said, is perhaps the most obvious and the most common trait colleges consider in applicants.

How do colleges choose which traits they value?

Colleges don’t like to talk about this much, and officials don’t like to be pinned down. In general, they say they look for traits that reflect the college’s values or that make a student a “good fit” for the institution.

Of the 10 colleges included in the College Board study, only one has performed any study on whether the use of criteria can help predict a student’s success, said Don Hossler, a senior scholar at the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice at the University of Southern California.

Colleges take it as a sign that their criteria works so long as their retention rates are good. But even subtle differences in criteria may reveal something about a college's values, or at least those of its admissions dean. Maria Laskaris, the admissions dean at Dartmouth College from 2007 to 2015, said she directed her staff to consider “empathy” rather than “kindness.” “It’s a broader term,” she said. “And it speaks to what you want students to learn from each other.”

How can admissions officers be objective about a trait like “empathy”?

They really can't, experts acknowledged, a fact that the lawsuit against Harvard claims has disadvantaged Asian-American applicants. Such evaluations are an exercise in “trying to be objectively subjective,” as Dr. Hossler put it. Colleges say they try to ward against bias by ensuring that applications are considered by more than one person. Often those that reach the final stages are debated in a group.

At Dartmouth, Ms. Laskaris said, she held a meeting each fall to try to ensure that the admissions rubric was being applied the same way by all of the admissions staff. The key, she said, was to find concrete examples of the desirable qualities — which included “open mindedness,” “curiosity” and “willingness to stretch” — in letters of recommendation, interviews or student essays.

But many of the people writing the recommendations may not know that there are particular phrases admissions officers are looking for, as opposed to simply attesting to a students' good citizenship and hard work. That can put the students at a disadvantage, said Ms. Laskaris, now a senior counselor at Top Tier Admissions, which advises students and families applying to college.

Admissions officers say they look for a “hook” in an applicant's file that may lift the student into consideration, but just what that is hard to define.

So are selective colleges moving away from using these subjective criteria?

No, in part because similar objections have been raised about the emphasis traditionally placed on standardized tests, which many experts believe fail to measure the potential of minority and low-income students.

Earlier this week, the University of Chicago became the first elite research university in the country to drop the requirement that applicants submit ACT or SAT scores, instead announcing a program inviting students to submit a two-minute video introduction — where they can perhaps convey their likability.