Equity in Testing Through Character Assessment

Three Case Studies:

Introduction by Dr. Meghan Brenneman, Director of Assessment Products, The Enrollment Management Association

The 2020–2021 admissions cycle has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging for schools and admission teams. The global pandemic has uprooted our human sense of normalcy and disrupted many systems upon which we have long depended. Education has not been exempt from these changes. With Chromebooks replacing textbooks and Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams becoming the new classroom for many students around the country, our interactions have relied more heavily on two-dimensional screens rather than face-to-face meetings. How, in this disrupted system, are admission teams able to fully evaluate everything a candidate has to offer?

In this year where educational delivery has been extremely disrupted, it is important to understand the impact this may have on an applicant’s file. As a result, many schools have made the decision to adopt a test-optional, test-flexible, or test-blind approach to evaluating applicants. As always, removing a data point from the admission file places more emphasis on the remaining factors, such as grades, the interview, the personal statement, etc.

At the same time schools have been navigating the interruptions to normalcy caused by COVID, they also have paid particular attention to biases that may have existed in longtime admissions practices. More and more, schools are embracing the importance of holistic admission practices that assist in seeking students of character by identifying traits such as personal drive, ethical perspective, and intellectual curiosity. The Character Skills Snapshot is one tool that can provide this important information to schools. It is an assessment that measures seven character skills: Intellectual Engagement, Initiative, Open-mindedness, Resilience, Self-control, Social Awareness, and Teamwork. The Snapshot helps to serve as an objective measure in that it introduces less bias than more subjective measures, such as grades, recommendations, and personal statements.

The following case studies highlight the “why” behind the decision these three EMA member schools made to implement the Character Skills Snapshot in their 2020–2021 admission process.

Dr. Meghan Brenneman is Director of Assessment Products at The Enrollment Management Association. She is co-editor of a book being released in October titled Assessing Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning: Conceptualization, Development and Applications, as well as a co-chair of a new course, Assessing Character in Admission: Essential Elements, which was funded by The Character Collaborative and NACAC.
By Vanessa Prescott, Director of Admissions for the Upper and Middle School

As an Admissions Director and educational leader at my institution, I must ask the following questions of myself and my department at the end of each year in order to be truly effective. What did we miss? What isn’t working? Who haven’t we served? What do we need to implement? I am keenly aware that it is my responsibility to set the standard for our Admissions Team and Reading Committee to analyze applicant files in a manner that sees “the whole child.” I must ensure that we are following a process that is truly equitable and in line with what our school’s mission espouses: “…prepare our diverse graduates for success in college and for the greater endeavor—a life of critical, ethical, and global thinking.” Developing a strong character is at the core of these tenets. This is why I decided that the Character Skills Snapshot could be an effective tool to help us identify strength of character in our admissions candidates.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we needed to respond to the radical changes that our prospective families would face. The reality that not all applicants would have an equitable shot at demonstrating who they are through all facets of the admissions process made it clear that we needed to modify and amend the process. For our school, the effects of the pandemic on prospective students had great relevance in lighting the way for us to continue our mission of offering a culturally responsive and equitable admissions process for all students. This was a prime moment to incorporate the Character Skills Snapshot into our application process. As an Admissions Director and a woman of color in this country, state, and city, I greatly appreciate that our school has always acknowledged the importance of affording each student the opportunity to build their identity toolbox and acquire all the necessary tools to fill that box. For the Admissions Team, character as an aspect of this identity was always a part of our rubric for assessing candidates in the admissions process. The Character Skills Snapshot simultaneously affords applicants a clear tool for demonstrating this aspect of themselves and admissions teams the ability to assess this crucial piece of their identity.

Although social distancing had separated us, our school was unified as a community in our commitment to helping families navigate this tumultuous time and ultimately what would be a stressful admissions landscape. As human beings, connections are mentally and physically at the core of how we navigate the world. An individual’s character is key to making these crucial connections. During this time, I am reminded of how important it is to stay connected and move forward as a community! As Coretta Scott King said, “The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.” What better way than to add a tool like the Character Skills Snapshot to help highlight these essential human qualities?!

Vanessa Prescott started teaching full-time at Berkeley Carroll in 1998 and is the Director of Admissions for the Middle and Upper School. She is also an upper school science teacher and a faculty advisor for several affinity groups at BC. She earned a B.S. and M.S. in science and an M.S. in Education and School Leadership.
By Craig Tredenick, Director of Admissions & Enrollment

The American School of Dubai (ASD) is a school that emphasizes character in every facet of school life. However, we recently recognized that our admission process did not align with our mission and core values, as the elements of our assessment of students did not include the areas we believe to be most critical to our community as a whole. As such, the admissions team went through an extensive audit of the application process and determined that a more intentional effort to gauge the “character” of our applicants was both important and necessary.

In our review of several tools to achieve the above, we quickly recognized that the Character Skills Snapshot would position us strongly to have a more complete and holistic view of our applicants. Additionally, the Snapshot would offer an opportunity for deeper dialogue during the interview process, speaking specifically to areas of the assessment that are now aligned with parts of the interview rubric. The result? We are now in a position to converse with each applicant about their own perceived intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skill set and to do so through the lens of their desire to be a part of the ASD family. We have found that the ability to do this also strengthens our understanding of each applicant through the traditional admission lens (school reports, recommendations, etc.).

As the educational landscape continues to shift, and the world continues to demand more self-aware, nimble, reflective, and dynamic citizens, ASD has continued to implement innovative practices that put the student in the driver’s seat of their own learning experience. Given this, the Snapshot will be an effective tool for us to identify the applicants who can and will embody the skills and dispositions we wish all of our students to leave as graduates with.

Lastly, when making the decisions to implement the Snapshot, ASD was cognizant of the potential application of the results schoolwide over time. Therefore, we are looking at ways to use the Snapshot to measure our effectiveness as a learning community at fostering and developing the character of our students. Simply put, as we focus more on curricular pieces related to character, we are hoping the Snapshot will provide us with data that can affirm our work or offer implicit feedback when a course correction may be warranted.

Craig Tredenick currently serves as the Director of Admissions & Enrollment at the American School of Dubai. Prior to ASD, Craig served as the Director of Enrollment Management at All Saints’ Episcopal School in Fort Worth, TX. Craig has presented internationally on topics related to leadership and enrollment management and has served as a faculty member and mentor across the enrollment management profession.
By Courtney Carlton, Director of Financial Assistance and Assistant Director of Admission

Lausanne Collegiate School (Memphis, TN) is a coeducational, college preparatory, PK2–12th grade International Baccalaureate World School whose student body represents 64 different countries with foreign nationals making up one-third of the school population. Our community is built upon forging meaningful relationships so that we may learn from one another by honoring and celebrating our differences and likenesses.

Lausanne offers students a distinctive learning community through an established history of education innovation that focuses on developing individual intellect, talents, creativity, and character through student-centered teaching; global diversity; and encouraging, challenging, and engaged learning. Our full-continuum, preschool-to-diploma International Baccalaureate (IB) programme is a natural fit for our school’s global mindset and for families seeking more breadth and depth for their children’s education.

Our admission team has always strived to provide an enrollment process that aligns with the values and focus of our curriculum, therefore we have always gone an extra step to get to know our applicants and their individual strengths and passions. We had the opportunity to attend The Enrollment Management Association conference in New Orleans, LA, in 2017. That was the first year EMA introduced the Character Skills Snapshot. From that moment, it had remained on our radar with an intention to add it into our admission process sometime in the future.

When the global pandemic hit, we found ourselves needing more. With some of our admission process having been recreated and tailored for virtual experiences, we thought that the Character Skills Snapshot would be a great way to get to know our applicants on a deeper level—especially their skill ability and how that may change over time. We knew this one piece could really elevate our admission process during a time when we needed it most. It aligned with our IB learner profile by evaluating seven non-cognitive areas: initiative, intellectual engagement, open-mindedness, resilience, social awareness, self-control, and teamwork.

By sharing this assessment option with our prospective families, our hope is to gain a clearer picture of an applicant’s character and development—both emotionally and academically—which would provide a meaningful measure of their fit for our school.

Courtney Carlton joined the Lausanne admission team in August 2013 after an early career in the business development and training department as a program coordinator for Morgan Keegan and Company, a local mid-South broker dealer firm. With a strong interest in education as well as making a difference in the world around her, Courtney felt a strong connection to Lausanne’s academic goals, global-mindedness, and community service efforts.