

spotlight on research

The Role of Noncognitive Assessment in Admissions

BY HEATHER HOERLE

The work of selecting students for admission into independent schools is becoming more complex. Each year, admissions officers review hundreds, sometimes thousands, of applications and seek to predict the likelihood of those applicants' success at their schools. They do so with a variety of traditional and necessary cognitive assessment tools, but they also do so in a culture increasingly interested in innovative approaches to measuring and predicting such success — especially when it comes to noncognitive skills.

Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed*, cover stories in the *New York Times Magazine*, Angela Duckworth's TED talks, Carol Dweck's trailblazing research at Stanford, Robert Sternberg's transformative practices in college admissions at Yale and Tufts, Tony Wagner's emphasis on creating innovators in schools, the emerging assessment strategies at numerous independent schools, and even the practices of the Oakland A's described in the book and film *Moneyball* are all features of this stimulating, contemporary conversation.

Confident that understanding and employing new approaches to assessment is a top priority for admissions professionals, the Secondary School Admission Test Board (SSATB) recently launched a Think Tank on the Future of Admission Assessment, with a two-year timeline and a charge to educate its membership and inspire greater innovation in admissions assessment practices. Among its initial steps, SSATB surveyed its members — including admissions officers in day and boarding schools, coeducational and single-sex schools, and religiously affiliated or nondenominational schools — and issued a special report on admissions assessment this past summer. What did the survey reveal? Among other things:

- Admissions officers now use a wide array of tools for assessing the “match” of applicants to their schools, including on-site observations of student applicants, group projects during admissions visits (with obser-



vation by trained teachers), behavioral and readiness assessments (school-specific), and parent essays (to determine family support for students).

- Admissions officers are eager to expand their assessments of applicants' noncognitive attributes. When asked to select from among a set of 16 such attributes the ones that matter, admissions officers expressed broad interest in nearly all of them. The list includes collaboration, competitiveness, creative thinking/creativity, curiosity, empathy, ethical judgment, initiative, locus of control, maturity, motivation, perseverance, problem solving, resilience, self-control, self-efficacy, and verbal communication.

- Although there are differences in emphasis by grade level and division, admissions officers agreed that creativity, problem solving, curiosity, self-control, and motivation top the list of most valued noncognitive skills. Among the other noncognitive skills that admissions offices value, self-control and curiosity are most popular in the lower grades; motivation, initiative, and perseverance in the higher grades.

SSATB plans to continue exploring the role of noncognitive assessment in the admissions process, including

ways in which current research on non-cognitive skills can inform admissions practices. It is also studying and showcasing innovative applicant assessment practices among its member schools, including the following:

- Choate Rosemary Hall (Connecticut) has found statistical correlation between student GPA and the data the school collects in admissions about self-efficacy, locus of control, and intrinsic motivation from an online student self-assessment.
- As the framework for applicant interviews, Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire) is using the eight criteria outlined in William E. Sedlacek's *Beyond the Big Test* that most correlate with college success. The criteria include positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understands and knows how to handle racism (the

system), availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experience, demonstrated community service, and knowledge acquired in or about a field.

- The Galloway School (Georgia) is using two innovative tools to assess collaborative abilities and perseverance among its applicants: (1) The Marshmallow Challenge, developed by Tom Wujec, innovative software developer and fellow at AutoDesk, in which teams must build, in 18 minutes, the tallest possible free-standing structure out of 20 sticks of spaghetti, one yard of tape, and one marshmallow (on top); and (2) the Grit Survey developed by Angela Duckworth, a positive psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, and based on the research of Stanford professor Carol Dweck.

- Cate School (California) has realigned its teacher recommendation forms

with the school's mission-driven emphasis on human growth in its cardinal virtues: persistence, awareness, responsibility, and kindness.

- New Canaan Country School (Connecticut) brings middle school applicants into its gym for a series of challenging, ropes-course-type activities, in which problem solving and collaboration are richly on display.

The full Special Report on the Future of Admission Assessment, along with a blog written by Jonathan E. Martin, principal of Jonathan E. Martin Educational Services, that chronicles the work of the Think Tank, can be found at www.admission.org.

Heather Hoerle is executive director of SSATB. The SSATB Think Tank Report is available at www.admission.org/thinktankreport.

Noncognitive Characteristics of Interest in Assessing Students

Pre-K-K
Self-Control, Curiosity, Locus of Control

1-3
Curiosity, Self-Control, Problem Solving

4-5
Problem Solving, Creative Thinking/
Creativity, Self-Control

6-8
Problem Solving, Creative Thinking/
Creativity, Initiative

9-12
Competitiveness, Ethical Judgment,
Self-Efficacy

PG
Motivation, Problem Solving,
Ethical Judgment



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