

10 BIG Ideas

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The Two Powerful Forces Changing College Admissions

By **Catherine Gewertz**

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Editor's Note: Senior Contributing Writer Catherine Gewertz covers pathways from secondary schools to adulthood. This analysis is part of a special report exploring pressing trends in education. Read the full report: [10 Big Ideas in Education](#).

The college-admission process exerts a powerful shaping influence on high school students. Eager to secure spots on campus, they scramble to build themselves into the people their dream schools seek, with the requisite honors classes, extracurricular passions, and perfectly structured essays.

But what if colleges rewrote that script? What if they found new ways to evaluate students, so they could better understand the value and nuance in their learning and in their life stories?

The students who stand to gain the most from such changes are those who are too often sidelined in the application process: The immigrant whose English isn't great yet, but who wowed her class with a worldwide DNA analysis. The boy who packs groceries 30 hours a week to keep his family afloat. The girl whose school doesn't offer AP courses, but who learned to read ancient Greek poetry in her spare time.

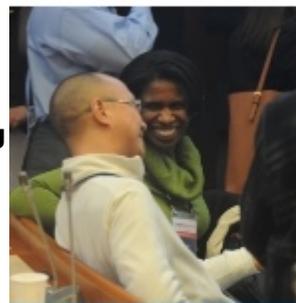
Projects to bring about these changes are afoot, and they're gaining traction. Two powerful streams are feeding their urgency: the pressure on colleges and universities to diversify their campuses, and a yearning in K-12 to pursue and measure learning in deeper, more meaningful ways.

[← Back to Story](#)

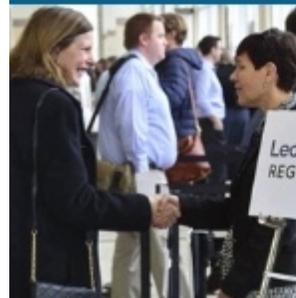
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Another Take on This **BIG Idea**

Many students don't realize the power of their stories of resilience. [Scroll down to read how high school teacher **Jessica Lander** is working to change that.](#)

Rewriting the admissions script could help usher more underserved students onto campus. And it could build support in K-12 for nontraditional approaches to learning. It could also encourage students to focus on civic virtues, like helping others.

Four initiatives, hatched in the last few years, are poised to turn what one project's leader calls "the huge, huge ship" of college admissions into more inclusive waters.

The one that's gotten the most attention aims high: Making Caring Common, led by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is urging colleges to give more weight in admission to the ways students serve their families and their communities.

Colleges are beginning to respond to the initiative's call. Some have changed their essay questions to elicit how students have served the greater good. MIT, for instance, used to ask students to write about a personal trait they're proud of. Instead, it now asks candidates to "describe one way in which you have contributed to your community, whether in your family, the classroom, your neighborhood, etc."

Some colleges have shifted the way they find new students. In recent recruiting, Trinity College in Connecticut focused heavily on students' service experience. Other colleges have revamped their applications to provide less space for extracurricular activities. The message: A few meaningful involvements are better than the laundry list of superficial ones that many high-flying students aim to build.

A cluster of other initiatives focus on finding new ways for students to show colleges a fuller picture of the value of their learning and life experiences. Those new approaches would be especially important for students who learn best in nontraditional ways.

The Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success has created an online platform to bring underrepresented students into the college-application pipeline.

Its application is designed to encourage colleges to recognize and reward a wider range of student characteristics than most applications ask about, including events in students' lives that illustrate their "character" or how they made a "meaningful contribution" to "the common good."

About 140 colleges are members of the coalition. Three years ago, in its first application cycle, 39,000 applications flowed into the coalition's system. By late fall 2018, that number had passed 130,000.

Assessment and the high school transcript are also part of the national conversation about rewriting the college admissions script.

About 225 public and private high schools across the country are designing a new kind of transcript they hope will offer colleges a fuller portrait of students' lives and their learning. The transcript will replace letter grades with measures of skills, such as persistence or the ability to foster honesty. This "Mastery Transcript" also allows students to include videos and projects.

Yet another initiative aims to persuade colleges and universities to accept performance-based assessments in admissions. The leaders of Reimagining College Access argue that evaluating student projects and nuanced descriptions of their work—rather than just grades and test scores—would allow application readers to see students' complexity and accomplishments in new ways.

If higher education embraces this shift, it could send bolstering messages into high schools that take a project- or competency-based approach, relieving worry that their students could be punished at the college door for nontraditional modes of study or grading.

It's an understatement to say that big barriers must be surmounted before these four initiatives can begin to alter the course of that big ship of college admissions.

Selective-college admission still bows deeply to big donors, promising athletes, and the children of alumni, as the recent trial on Harvard's admissions practices showed. Less-selective schools tend to rely on more-formulaic admissions decisions. Application readers typically have only a few minutes to spend on each student's application. How can they get the time to dive more deeply? And that doesn't even touch the challenge of how, exactly, colleges should assess ethical character.

But nevertheless, the projects persist. And they're expanding. They've taken aim at the big ship, and they're trying to turn it, however slowly, in the hope of bringing more students aboard.

< Idea #9

The Innovation Trap



Idea #1 >

The Rising Relevance Gap



PERSPECTIVE

Another Take on This **BIG** Idea

How to Help College Applicants Tell Their Own Stories

By Jessica Lander

Colleges are missing out on some of our country's most incredible students.

I teach history to more than 150 high school students, most of them immigrants and refugees from more than 30 countries. Many have fled violence in their home countries to find safety, freedom, and opportunity here.

This fall, I have been coming in early and staying late to help mentor 30 of my seniors navigate the college application process.

Their SAT scores are not quite as high, their extracurricular activities not as extensive, and their academic transcripts not as packed with AP courses as students from more privileged backgrounds. But, they are likely better versed in the 21st-century skills—perseverance, creativity, adaptability—colleges and employers say they want.

Yet, my students often don't realize how powerful their stories of resilience are and how their experiences and skills speak volumes about their ability to thrive in college.

There is the Congolese refugee who has mastered 10 languages and works 45 hours weekly as a certified nursing aide. The Cambodian immigrant who taught herself coding and then blew through the highest-level computer science course offered at our school. The Ugandan refugee who helped start a school-based food pantry, but is also often responsible for ensuring that her younger siblings are fed, clean, and

ready for school. The confident Iraqi student who often acts as a linguistic and cultural translator, helping her parents with government or medical paperwork. The young Colombian immigrant who mastered English only in the last three years, but has already become a young civic leader—serving on a national civics education board, testifying in front of the state legislature, publishing op-eds, and coaching teachers on civics education.

We need these young men and women on our college campuses. How do we as educators ensure they get there? I propose four concrete steps:

1. Reimagine the college application. Many colleges have committed to increasing their number of incoming first-generation and low-income students. To succeed at this goal, colleges must rethink what strengths they value and seek out. Applications need to explicitly encourage and affirm the skills my students—and so many others—possess. Colleges need to also move away from standardized testing, which favors natural test takers or those who can pay for extensive tutoring.

2. Invest in counselors. Across the United States, one school counselor is, on average, responsible for supporting the academic growth, emotional health, and future success of 464 public school students. For students who will be the first in their family to attend college, or whose parents haven't mastered English, or who attend large schools where counselor ratios tend to be higher, counselors play a critical role in ensuring students can navigate the college process. As a stop-gap measure, there are a myriad of local and national nonprofit programs designed to connect students to college application mentors. In the long term, more school counselors are needed.

3. Close the information gap. There are a growing number of welcoming colleges and excellent scholarships and college transition programs to support low-income, first-generation, and immigrant students. But, these great options are not centrally compiled and easily accessible.

4. Elevate students' stories. In working to support my seniors this fall, I am struck time and again by their extraordinary skills and perseverance. We teachers can do much to draw out and affirm our students' stories, increasing the chance that colleges will recognize the incredible young men and women we teach.

Jessica Lander is a high school teacher, journalist, and author living in Cambridge, Mass.

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