

# Considering the value of developing character in students



**Your Turn**  
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Guest columnist

It is commonly believed that child rearing and schooling should focus on developing cognitive skills. According to this belief, the more smarts acquired by a young person – the type of intelligence measured by IQ tests – the more successful they will be later in life.

In accordance with this belief, parents, and educators stress children reading, calculating, detecting patterns and memorizing as much and as early as possible.

The belief in the primacy of cognitive skills lies at the core of the General Education Development testing program. At the turn of the century, the GED test was fast growing in popularity and touted as a way of leveling the educational playing field. By taking and passing the GED test, students from more challenged socioeconomic backgrounds, who otherwise would be more likely to drop out of high school, were afforded an alternative pathway to a higher education degree and thereby enhanced professional opportunities and success.

At the high point of 2001, over 1 million individuals took the GED test in the United States and nearly 20 percent of those who had completed high school had done so by passing the equivalency test.

Jim Heckman, a Nobel-Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago, cast serious doubt on the hypothesis of cognitive skills being of primary importance in childhood development

by examining the future outcomes of individuals who had completed high school by passing the GED test. Heckman's analysis confirmed that GED holders were every bit as smart, cognitively, as traditional high school graduates, as measured by achievement test scores.

However, when it came to all sorts of other future performance measures such as higher education attainment, annual income, unemployment rate and divorce rate, Heckman found that GED holders closely resembled high school dropouts, notwithstanding being considerably more intelligent than high school dropouts. For example, by the age of 22, only 3 percent of GED holders were enrolled in college or had earned a college degree versus 46 percent of high school graduates.

As noted by Paul Tough in his book "How Children Succeed," over the past several decades, social scientists have increasingly documented the greater importance of developing character versus cognition when rearing and educating children. By character, Tough refers particularly to characteristics such as grit, curiosity, optimism, self-control and judgment – in addition to empathy, gratitude and morality.

Evidence in favor of the primacy of character includes the research of psychologist Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania. By studying eighth graders at a magnet school in Philadelphia, for example, Duckworth found that students' self-discipline scores from the previous fall were far better predictors of their final GPAs than their IQ scores. Duckworth also developed a measure of grit and found that, while such a measure is only faintly related to the IQ scores of Penn under-

graduates, it better predicts students' final average GPAs than do the SAT or ACT board scores registered by those students when applying for admission.

Other studies find that high school GPAs, even when unadjusted for the average GPA for a students' high school graduating class, are a better predictor of students' academic undergraduate performance than are their SAT or ACT board scores. Ditto for students' graduate-level academic performance. An MBA student's undergraduate GPA, that is, predicts their overall graduate-level GPA better than does the student's score on the GMAT test typically required by schools for admission to graduate business study.

The relatively greater importance of character versus cognition is evidenced by employers being willing to pay almost a two-times premium for students who earn a college degree versus those who don't. After all, if cognitive skills were all that mattered: Prospective employers could bypass the cost of visiting college campuses and instead base their hiring decisions on the IQ or board scores submitted by candidates with or without a college education.

The fact that they do not do so attests to the value employers place on the character development that colleges provide: curiosity and judgment through faculty-mentored research projects; leadership, time management, team-playing, and perseverance through co-curricular activities such as athletics and student clubs; global perspectives and intercultural competency through interactions with a diverse campus community, study-abroad opportunities, and social studies curricula; grit through internships, co-ops, and word-study; and ethics through curric-

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ular offerings in the humanities.

Notwithstanding the apparent greater importance of character versus cognitive skill building in child rearing and education, many higher education institutions still disproportionately focus on the average SAT or ACT score of and the number of National Merit Scholars in their incoming class. It is arguably easier to quantify and compare measures of cognitive skills such as those provided by board scores.

The evidence, however, suggests that prospective students, their employers, the broader society, as well as higher education institutions such as mine will be better served if we base our admissions and scholarship allocation decisions more on character than cognition. Moreover, all involved will also be better served the more that colleges can further develop the aspects of character valued by prospective employers.

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