

Student's grit matters as much as test scores

I am always encouraged when academics finally experience epiphanies about matters that always have been the stuff of common sense. By common sense, I mean apprehending the obvious, paying attention to ordinary events that follow the laws of logic and probability independent of our attempts to impose our conclusions on them.

In this instance, college admissions officers in great numbers are acknowledging that a personality trait called "grit" should be a part of any admissions program that claims to be fair. A handful of institutions — DePaul, Tufts and Wake Forest are among the largest — have made it formal policy. If schools are fair, they use a "holistic" measure when determining applicants' suitability. In other words, they earnestly assess the whole student, not just his or her SAT and ACT score, IQ and high school grade-point average.

They also consider what are known as "noncognitive" skills — grit. This is and always has been a matter of common sense, at least to me.

In Denver recently at the National Association for College Admission Counseling's annual meeting, Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania assistant professor of psychology, described grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course."

Think of the thousands of such students who are rejected each year because admissions officers only consider evidence of cognitive skills such as standardized test scores.

Over the years as a college writing teacher, I have had low-income students, and still have them, who were the first in their families to attend college, who sit alongside classmates who otherwise have every socioeconomic advantage.

This is especially true at community colleges where many low-income minority students enter the classroom frightened and feeling out of place. Some never wrote an essay in public school, and almost all hold

down part-time or full-time jobs. Many have young children to care for.

I am not surprised when they out-perform many of their classmates who are far better off, who often have higher standardized test scores and high school GPAs. Most of these students struggle with their assignments.

Instead of quitting, however, they hang around after class and ask me to discuss their errors and how to correct them.

Last term, one student, a full-time attendant at a retirement facility, revised all of her essays more than once, and she never missed voluntary individual conferences. I was impressed because she showed grit. The college was smart to have admit-



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ted her.

This student and others like her prove, as Duckworth argues, that grit may be as essential as intelligence when it comes to high achievement. In related research conducted at an Ivy League university, Duckworth found that so-called smarter students had less grit than students who scored lower on intelligence tests.

She told the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that "it's not necessarily that IQ doesn't matter, but I think the promising message for students is that we can all work harder, or at least most of us can." Taken by itself, to struggle may not be a sign that a student lacks the intelligence to succeed, she said. "An IQ problem — that's not what makes schoolwork hard. Effort is hard, boredom is hard."

Traditionalists, those who believe in admitting students only on the basis of meritocracy, see the consideration of noncognitive skills as being too subjective, an approach that will lower standards when large numbers of applicants must be evaluated.

Many of my colleagues and I disagree. Each term, we see gritty students, determined to succeed, who out-perform many of those with more money and higher cognitive scores.

The time has long passed for us to pay attention to the ordinary events that follow the laws of logic and probability and apply common sense. We should know by now that intelligence is not everything and that grit matters. We see evidence of it every day.

Why not include it in the admissions process?

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