



SUNDAYREVIEW | OPINION

Throw Out the College Application System

By ADAM GRANT OCT. 4, 2014

THE college admissions system is broken. When students submit applications, colleges learn a great deal about their competence from grades and test scores, but remain in the dark about their creativity and character. Essays, recommendation letters and alumni interviews provide incomplete information about students' values, social and emotional skills, and capacities for developing and discovering new ideas.

This leaves many colleges favoring achievement robots who excel at the memorization of rote knowledge, and overlooking talented C students. Those with less than perfect grades might go on to dream up blockbuster films like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg or become entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Barbara Corcoran and Richard Branson.

There is a better way for colleges to gather comprehensive information about candidates. It's called an assessment center, and it's been in use for more than half a century to screen candidates for business, government and military positions.

The roots of the assessment center in the United States can be traced back to 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Strategic Services, a precursor to the C.I.A. The O.S.S. was responsible for secret intelligence, research and analysis, and special operations behind enemy lines, but there was a major problem: No one had any clue how to select a spy.

The O.S.S. engaged a team of psychologists to establish an assessment unit. In 1944, the psychologist Donald W. MacKinnon ran Station S, where for 15 months he oversaw the assessment of hundreds of recruits, putting them through exhaustive personality tests and field trials. Over three and a half days, each candidate had to build up and maintain a comprehensive cover story. The candidates falsified their names, ages, professions and residences, and Dr. MacKinnon's team evaluated their effectiveness, sending the highest-scoring spies on covert missions.

In 1956, the psychologist Douglas W. Bray pioneered the use of the assessment center in a corporate setting. At AT&T, Dr. Bray and several colleagues developed reliable techniques for evaluating new managers on attributes such as leadership skills, motivation and optimism, and succeeded in predicting the managers' advancement rates and effectiveness.

Today, at a typical center, applicants spend a day completing a series of individual tasks, group activities and interviews. Some assessments are objectively scored for performance; others are observed by multiple trained evaluators looking for key behaviors.

At General Electric, aircraft engine mechanics are rated on teamwork skills while they build a helicopter out of Legos. At KPMG, aspiring auditors show their organizational, analytical and communication capabilities while running a virtual office and writing a report. Extensive research indicates that these types of assessments can prove powerful in evaluating skills and predicting future behavior.

Although assessment centers are rare in college admissions, they are not new to education. Back in 1988, the education researchers Frederick C. Wendel and Ward Sybouts wrote a report for the University Council for Educational Administration reviewing the practices involved in using assessment centers to select school principals and administrators.

Sending student applicants to assessment centers would solve at least three problems for college admissions. First, colleges have traditionally relied on recommendation letters from different teachers and interviews with different alumni who evaluate students in different situations. These idiosyncrasies create a great deal of noise: Reports reveal as much about the teachers, interviewers and situations as they do about the students. In an assessment center, students answer standardized questions and are rated by multiple evaluators on a common standard.

Second, many colleges still rely heavily on grades and test scores to admit candidates. Assessment centers give nontraditional students a better chance to display their strengths. For example, imagine that a college wants to focus less on book smarts and more on wisdom and practical intelligence. Rigorous studies demonstrate that we can assess wisdom by asking applicants to give advice on moral dilemmas: What would you say to a friend who is considering suicide? How should a single parent juggle family and work? The answers offer a window into how well students balance different interests and values.

Similarly, we can identify candidates with strong interpersonal and emotional skills by watching students teach a lesson to a challenging audience — as Teach for America does when assessing applicants. And tests have already been developed to measure creativity and street smarts, which predict college grades over and above high school grades and SAT scores, while reducing differences among ethnic groups. By broadening the range of criteria, assessment centers make it possible to spot diamonds in the rough.

Third, when students submit essays and creative portfolios in the current application system, it is impossible to know how much help they have received from parents and mentors. In an assessment center, we can verify that students are personally responsible for the work they produce.

Of course, creating college assessment centers will involve both financial and practical challenges. Universities and colleges could provide funding for assessment centers to design key exercises, employ and train evaluators, and provide reports on students. The most efficient structure would mirror the existing Common Application: Students go to an assessment center for a day, and their results are submitted to the full suite of colleges to which they apply. Although the cost of applications would initially increase, in the long run selecting students who fit could translate into more satisfied alumni and more generous donations.

Practically, all assessment centers are not created equal, and some of the most effective methods are the more expensive and time-consuming. In a quantitative review of 50 studies led by the psychologist Barbara B. Gaugler, assessment center data had more value when multiple evaluation techniques were in place, peer feedback was utilized, and assessors were trained to observe key behaviors and tested for consistency and accuracy.

For these reasons, the pioneers in adopting assessment centers for admission may be professional schools. Business, law and medical schools are placing a growing premium on emotional intelligence, creative problem-solving, ethical judgment and interpersonal skills. Since they evaluate and accept smaller numbers of applicants, professional schools may find assessment centers more cost effective.

We send students to spend half a day at a testing center to take the SAT. We ought to invest equal time in sending them to assessment centers to gauge their values and their social, emotional and creative capabilities. If colleges did this, they would gain a much better picture of their prospective students. More students would have a fair chance to demonstrate their distinctive talents and

qualifications, and colleges might be less likely to reject the next Walt Disney.

Adam Grant is a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of "Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success."

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