

The X Factor: Noncognitive Assessments in Admissions

by Peter Gilbert, Director of Admissions, Salisbury School (CT)
and Allison W. Matlack, MAT, IECA (MA)



We all know who we're talking about. It's that student who has a certain je ne sais quoi that makes him an appealing applicant. Maybe it's his bright smile or the ease with which he laughs at himself. Maybe it's the way she talks about her friends or explains why she's running for student body president. Maybe it's even the way he describes his summer camp

experience. But it's something you can sense without being able to articulate the reasons why—that this kid is a great applicant. And even though grades and standardized test scores might fall a bit shy of the typical standards, this is a student you want at your school because you know he or she is going to thrive.

Although Simon Cowell refers to those qualities that make contestants stand out as the elusive "X Factor," independent schools' admissions offices have been working to define those intangible personal qualities that are strong predictors of a student's success at their schools. Through the use of noncognitive assessments, some schools are moving to a more holistic evaluation of their applicants, using creative interview formats, and finding the change worth the risk.

Holistic Admission Formula

Year after year, Salisbury School administrators observed that some boys who had entered with comparable grades and SSAT scores were graduating with very different academic profiles. They started to think seriously about which qualities were nurtured at Salisbury that enabled some students to achieve better than their peers and developed metrics to evaluate the specific noncognitive skills that they believed correlated with that success.

According to the Secondary School Admission Test Board's *Think Tank on the Future of Assessment* (2013), although the qualities most schools agree that they are looking for in their applicants include "creativity, problem solving, curiosity, self-control, and motivation," some schools also look for specific traits that align with their mission statements. After completing two SSAT validity studies, a college/outcome result analysis for three graduating classes, and an attrition study, Salisbury School developed a holistic admissions formula that complimented the school's mission statement. Priding themselves on graduating "men of character," they began to look more aggressively for applicants who demonstrated creativity, integrity, leadership, respect, humility, and empathy, with the conviction that their single-gender environment was optimal for boys to confidently grow their noncognitive skills, such as curiosity, adaptability, benevolence, and optimism. Likewise at Putney School, which has a strong social justice premise, John Barrengos, the director of admission, looks for students who believe that community

service and "saving the world" are important to leading a meaningful and fulfilled life.

Creative Interview Formats

Not all noncognitive assessments are equally useful. Some schools have realized that the traditional interview format does not always provide rich information about applicants, particularly in the younger grades. Once Noble and Greenough School started assessing middle school applicants by observing students' participation in a group activity, they discovered that they were able to discern much more about the students' characters, interpersonal styles, and problem-solving skills than they had been able to gather in a formal interview setting. At North Country School, the interview takes the form of a "walk and talk" around campus, and in this more casual setting, students more freely share information about themselves. According to Libby Doan, the learning support coordinator, that conversation is used to evaluate how the students identify their areas of strength, where they seek to improve, and whether they can articulate their needs.

Schools are also encouraging students to spend more time on campus as part of the evaluative process. At Cambridge Friends School, prospective applicants spend the morning in classes, and teachers evaluate how well they listen, contribute, demonstrate flexible thinking, and share their knowledge. Kelly Baker, the director of admission and financial aid, believes that they are able to glean such valuable information about a student during the optional group assessment that they waive the standardized testing requirement for students who choose to participate. Students at North Country School spend a full day on campus visiting classes and having lunch with faculty and students. Through "intentional observation," the faculty members look for evidence of the student's self-knowledge and relational abilities with adults and peers as well as their ability to engage in "spontaneous, exuberant conversation." That information provides meaningful insight into how that student might take advantage of the opportunities offered at the school and how he or she might thrive there.

Risk Worth Taking

So with all this additional noncognitive evaluation, are schools finding that they are admitting a pool of applicants who are a better fit than they might otherwise? Generally, the answer is yes. Although Putney, like many schools, has no firm cut-offs for SSAT scores, its leaders are willing to take a risk on a student if they believe that the culture at their school will help that student flourish socially and intellectually. According to Barrengos, "as our progressive educational philosophy takes broader



grasp of the totality of the student experience, I have permission to unapologetically pursue the students for whom this pedagogy—across their experience, from classroom to barn to dorm to sports to arts—is an answer to their journey; either a salve for the boy who ‘got’ school in third grade and is now bored to tears or a salvation for the girl who never found her traditional model viable and has been chafing against its limits throughout.”

There are also incidental advantages to incorporating noncognitive assessments in the admissions process. Schools are finding that doing so can level the playing field for some applicants because, unlike being tutored for the SSAT, there is no way to prepare. The process can also feel less daunting and intimidating. Salisbury School found the holistic review of applicants to be especially important for candidates from nontraditional backgrounds; those with learning differences; and, in general, maturing boys. Noble and Greenough School has found an increase in their enrollment of students of color in the middle school since implementing the noncognitive assessment, and Jennifer Hines, dean for enrollment management, happily observed that “students leave our office smiling, rather than feeling traumatized.” Doan, at North Country School, has had similar experiences. In fact, it is not uncommon for students at the end of a school visit day to ask if they can stay longer. To her, that is one of the best indicators that the student will be a good fit.

Yet noncognitive assessment isn’t a great dustpan that gathers up those candidates who are on the fringes of admission. In fact, the careful use of these metrics can rule out some students who otherwise would be attractive candidates. For example, students who aren’t able to self-advocate and who are used to being taken care of by adults as well as students who have stopped being engaged in their learning, their communities, and their relationships might not be offered acceptance because they don’t have the appropriate noncognitive skills to succeed.

In the end, however, the schools we contacted were pleased with the caliber of the students who were matriculating. Each year at Salisbury’s graduation prize night, it is poignant to reflect on the place where each boy started. Last spring, the two students who were awarded the general improvement prize by vote of the faculty were boys who earned admission because of their noncognitive skills. It was powerfully affirming to see that the qualities Salisbury sought in their applicants had translated into social and academic success. It has been said that cognitive ability predicts educational attainment and that noncognitive skills predict a life outcome. The success of those two graduates and others like them speaks to the value of including noncognitive assessments in a holistic admission process.

Peter Gilbert can be reached at pgilbert@saliburyschool.org.

Allison Matlack can be reached at amatlackedcon@gmail.com.

