# Top Colleges Now Value What Founders Have Always Hired For

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

If you're an entrepreneur, you understand this dynamic well: credentials open doors, but character closes deals.

College admissions work the same way.

A perfect GPA and test scores don't get a student into an Ivy League school. They get the application opened. From there, it's emotional intelligence, social awareness and self-understanding that determine who gets in — and who gets waitlisted or denied.

This is why every year, top colleges turn down Valedictorians — and admit Salutatorians who demonstrate more maturity, curiosity and insight into who they are and how they grow.

**Related: 8 Must-Have Leadership Qualities for Workplace Success**

## Why "be authentic" isn't helpful advice

When students sit down to write their personal statements, they're told to "be authentic" or "show emotional intelligence." But those phrases are abstract. What do they actually mean? How do admissions readers interpret them?

Most families assume that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

is about being kind, likable or involved in service work. But SEL isn't about checking personality boxes. It's a competency framework. A set of skills. And increasingly, it's the clearest proxy for future success — not just in school, but in life.

## What SEL really is — and why it matters now more than ever

At its core, SEL consists of five key competencies:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

These are real-world, transferable skills — rooted in emotional intelligence (EQ) — that students must develop if they're going to thrive in dynamic, high-pressure environments like college. Or startups. Or the real world.

Colleges aren't just evaluating what students *know* — they're assessing how students think, how they grow, and how they relate to others. That's why the personal essay exists in the first place: it's a live demonstration of how a student thinks about themselves and the world around them.

It's also why, in the new admissions landscape — test-optional, post-affirmative-action, and increasingly holistic — SEL has moved from "nice to have" to strategic advantage.

## Character is the competitive edge

According to the 2024–2025 Common Data Set, across Ivy League and Top 20 schools, the number one most consistently important non-academic factor in admissions isn't work experience. It's

not talent. It’s not even extracurriculars. It’s character and personal qualities.

Let that land for a moment.

MIT marked this category as the *only* “very important” factor in their entire non-academic review process — above talent, extracurriculars or recommendations.

What they’re really asking is: Can this student lead themselves? Can they work with others? Can they adapt and grow under pressure?

**Related: 4 Best Practices for Smarter Higher-Education Admissions Procedures**

## The three most strategic SEL moves students can make

Over decades in admissions, we’ve helped students turn personal qualities into compelling essays that demonstrate maturity, leadership and EQ — not just say they have it.

Here’s what actually works:

## 1. Insight over performance

Most students treat the personal essay like a TED Talk. They tell a big story and drop a moral in the final paragraph — hoping it lands like a mic drop.

That doesn’t work.

Colleges want to see insight. Reflection. Specific examples of *how* a student grew, not just *what* happened to them. The strongest essays aren’t about life-changing moments — they’re about mindset shifts.

Big realizations > big stories.

## 2. Build a voice, not a persona

Trying to sound “smart,” “quirky” or “deep” almost always backfires. Colleges can tell when students are forcing a certain personality or voice on the page. How? Because it’s the same “voice” that appears on nearly half their applications, they eventually end up denying.

Strong essays don’t need gimmicks. They need clarity.

Don’t:

- Overuse metaphors to manufacture meaning
- Write in a voice that isn’t yours
- Hide vulnerability behind clever formatting

Do:

- Be specific about how your thinking has changed
- Use language that sounds like you, not a TEDx speaker
- Share grounded, honest moments — not performances

## 3. Study the right models

Students often base their essays on viral “How I Got In” posts, which are more about performance than substance. These essays follow a formula that doesn’t demonstrate actual SEL.

Better models? Read published personal essays from real writers — Joan Didion, Brian Doyle, Esmé Wang. These are authors who write with emotional intelligence, depth and nuance.

## Final thought

If you’re a founder, you know what it’s like to bet on people. Admissions officers do the same. They’re not just looking at performance. They’re looking at *potential.*

And the clearest indicator of future potential — in leadership, in relationships, in adversity — is how well someone understands themselves.

That’s what SEL reveals. And that’s why it’s the most overlooked yet powerful lever in modern college admissions strategy.

If you’re an entrepreneur, you understand this dynamic well: credentials open doors, but character closes deals.

College admissions work the same way.

A perfect GPA and test scores don’t get a student into an Ivy League school. They get the application opened. From there, it’s emotional intelligence, social awareness and self-understanding that determine who gets in — and who gets waitlisted or denied.

The rest of this article is locked.

Join Entrepreneur+ today for access.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/top-colleges-now-value-what-founders-have-always-hired-for/490593