A few months ago the Making Caring Common Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education released a report entitled “Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions,” which talks about ways the college admissions process might “promote greater ethical engagement among aspiring students, reduce excessive achievement pressure, and level the playing field for economically disadvantaged students.”

I was very pleased to endorse the report, along with more than 100 of my admissions colleagues at colleges around the country. I think it is a very strong report that will help prospective students and their families by clarifying the expectations that admissions officers have of students – and more important, by clarifying what we do not expect. I believe there has been a growing mismatch between what students think they need to do to be strong applicants, and what they actually need to do.

In simple terms, we want students to pursue the things that interest them with energy and enthusiasm. We want students to make decisions that are educationally sound for them to best prepare them to succeed in college and beyond. We want students to challenge themselves appropriately in the areas that are most interesting to them. We want students to engage with their community in their pursuits. And, we want students who demonstrate strong ethical character. In short, we want young people to be students and community members first, and applicants second.

We don’t want students to do things just because they think they have to. We don’t want students to take advanced classes out of a sense of competition, rather than the joy of learning. We don’t want a laundry list of a million activities. And we don’t want students sacrificing quality for quantity – something that is happening far too often. We also don’t want students who have other responsibilities – such as taking care of siblings after school or working 20-30 hours a week to support their family – or who come from school districts with limited resources and fewer advanced course offerings to feel like they are not going to be strongly considered for admission because of their circumstances. And we don’t want this push for quantity to crowd out interest in the common good. Because when you get to college – this is especially true at MIT – engaging and collaborating with others is the foundation of our culture and community.

Oftentimes we’re asked, what do you really expect of applicants? What specific classes should I take or activities should I be involved in? There is no one answer to this question. At MIT, we admitted 1,511 students this year, and none of them were exactly alike. However, all 1,511 were a great match for MIT.

In recent years MIT has strived to emphasize many of the ideas and recommendations highlighted in the Turning the Tide report, and I have heard from current and prospective MIT students and parents, saying how appreciative they are of our efforts. MIT’s mission is to use science, technology, and other areas of scholarship for the betterment of society and we select students who exemplify and will help serve this mission.

I have also heard from some who have questions about the report and what our endorsement of it will mean in practice for our admissions process, and I thought I would address those topics here. I think there is a lot of excitement about the prospect of a more transparent admissions process and our “turning down the heat” on students, but also some skepticism as to whether we can actually do it.

Our commitment to academic excellence will not waver.
We are still looking for students to challenge themselves and stretch themselves, academically and personally. The fact that I have received these questions, however, points out how much quantity and volume have become equated with challenge and excellence. And that is exactly what we are trying to dispel. I believe that quantity and volume can work against excellence. Students who stretch themselves too thin actually learn less than they might if they were more focused.

Some have asked if this means we will admit students with lower grades and test scores if they have demonstrated strong commitment to their communities. In fact, this is the very definition of holistic admissions, and we have always looked at students in their entirety. It is true that the academic bar is set very high for MIT, and students have to have very good grades and test scores to demonstrate their ability to handle MIT’s rigorous curriculum, but they don’t have to be perfect and our decisions are made looking at the whole student and their match with MIT.

Our commitment to the principles outlined in the report does not add more space to campus. We remain committed to admitting students with strong academics who are aligned with MIT’s culture, mission, and values.

Our admission rate is simply a reality of the number of applicants we have and the limited space on campus. And the fact that we have to turn away very many outstanding applicants doesn’t mean those applicants were not qualified or well-matched for MIT and doing all the right things.

In fact, the Turning the Tide report encourages students to worry less about this question. Half a century ago, B. Alden Thresher, MIT’s first admissions director, cautioned students against over worrying about where they went to college, saying a student should not “think of education as something beneficial that will be done to him [sic], [as much as] something he gets for himself [sic].” Indeed, the ultimate goal for a student should not be trying to get into a specific college, but to do things most beneficial for themself as a person and citizen. Whether a student has a great college experience or not is really up to the efforts and outlook that they bring with them.

This points out how important the direction of decision-making is for students. A student should first decide what they are interested in, then decide on what classes and activities to pursue, and only then think about which colleges would be a great fit. Too many students go backwards, thinking about the college first, and that is not a recipe for success.

At MIT, standardized tests and challenging coursework will continue to be important in our process.

Standardized tests provide an important service for us and our students, and we plan to use them the same way we currently do – not in a system of strict cutoffs, but as one of many parts of a contextual, holistic review.

I know there are many skeptics as to the value of standardized tests, and I know their value can vary at different institutions, but at MIT, we have found that standardized tests and grades are predictive of success in our challenging curriculum. While we know the tests are not perfect, they do provide an informative and consistent measure of a student’s academic potential in a world where high school experiences vary so widely. The tests allow us to admit students from across the country – and the globe – for whom we will have high confidence that they will thrive and succeed at MIT; for we care deeply about not only admitting great students, but also ensuring and supporting their success throughout their college career.
All that said, I do think that students stress out over their test scores more than they should. In the college admissions process, they are one factor of many, and small differences in scores don’t matter like students think they do.

*While we expect students to challenge themselves, we do not expect students to challenge themselves in all areas.*

We do expect academic excellence, and looking at a student’s transcript – the choice of classes they took and the grades they achieved – is of primary importance. But in recent years, to align with our actual practice, we have moved our language from saying that we want students to take “the most rigorous classes available to them,” to saying we want them to take “the most rigorous classes available in the subjects that most interest them,” not across the board. I wrote an op-ed piece about this a few years ago, and we mean it – we are careful that our selection process is aligned with this. Additionally, while we expect students to have good grades, they don’t have to be perfect.

Some students thrive on the challenge of taking many advanced classes, and for them that is an appropriate choice. Students should be confident in whatever educational choice they make that is best for them. The number of advanced classes a student takes is never the reason why he or she was (or was not) admitted.

*Students should pursue the things they love, but it is okay if you haven’t found what you love yet.*

We want students to pursue the things that interest them. For some students, this might mean Pursuing one activity or set of closely related activities in some real depth. For other students, it might mean being involved in a larger array of activities. We have no preference: instead, we look for the energy and attitude that students bring to their pursuits when we make our evaluations.

This does bring up an area where colleges have to be more careful with our language. Often students are told that colleges prefer students who “demonstrate a deep commitment” to an activity. This language can be harmful, as it might make a student reluctant to drop one activity in pursuit of another.

Students should commit to whatever activity they are doing while they are doing it, but they should feel free to explore different activities without worrying about whether it will hurt their chances of admission to a selective college.

*We want to broaden the definition of “community service” to encompass a deeper sense of intellectual and ethical engagement.*

Community service has become an “activity” these days, in the same way that sports or an academic club is an activity, and is often marked by the phrase, “I have to go do my community service.” We want to broaden the definition. We do not just look at the activity that a student engages in as much as the general outlook and commitment to others that a student displays. Certainly, a student can demonstrate this in a traditional community service activity, such as volunteering in a local community organization, and this is a great thing to do. But we will also consider what kind of a citizen a student is: if they know the material well in a class, will they help others who are struggling? Do they take care of other family members? Do they have a genuine commitment to helping others, or are they doing things simply to look good on the application? The essay question on our application where we ask about this never mentions the phrase “community service,” but asks students to tell us about how they have improved the lives of others in their community. And it’s not the magnitude that counts as much as the intention and character of the student.
I believe this is more important than ever before. The world is more globally connected, and we are living in the most multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic America ever and it is vital that we are supporting our communities in meaningful ways so that we can create a society in which everyone can thrive and succeed.

*From what I have seen of students enrolling at MIT, students today are very much interested in the common good.*

My experience with students at MIT is that they are deeply committed to service. However, the report cites evidence that the pressures on students have caused them to be less engaged in the common good. This may be due to the mixed messages that colleges and universities are sending students, which have left students with difficult choices and moved them to consider individual achievement over investment in the common good. It is my hope that this report will clarify our actual expectations to remove these pressures on students.

*In response to the report and the issues it addresses, we have made changes to our process.*

I believe for many years we have consistently tried to send the message to students that quality is more important than quantity and that engagement with others is important. As I mentioned above, I think the power in this report is that colleges are collectively endorsing its messages, banding together to speak with one voice to send this message in the hopes that it will take hold.

For our part, beyond just talking about this, we have taken some concrete steps to send this message to our applicants. More than ten years ago, we reduced the number of spaces for students to list their extracurricular activities from 10 to 5, because we felt we were inadvertently sending the message that students had to have 10.

And, inspired by this report, we changed one of our essay questions for last year’s application. The question allowed students to tell us how they improve the lives of others in their community:

"At MIT, we seek to develop in each member of our community the ability and passion to work collaboratively for the betterment of humankind. How have you improved the lives of others in your community? (This could be one person or many, at school or at home, in your neighborhood or your state, etc.)"

And we continually ensure that our admissions decisions align with our messages and our values.

*How will we know if the messages in the report will have a positive impact?*

The Turning the Tide report is the first step in bringing colleges together to be more thoughtful communicators and more transparent about what we are looking for when we select students. It is only a first step, and one that has already sparked important dialogue about the process and how it is practiced. The real test will come over time, if it is clear that the admissions decisions that colleges and universities make are aligned with what we say and what we believe.

It is my hope that students will not do things because they think they have to only to serve the college admissions process, but that they will feel empowered to explore and pursue the things that interest them, to make those around them better, and to have fun.