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Opinion

Check This Box if You're a Good Person

By **Rebecca Sabky**

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HANOVER, N.H. — When I give college information sessions at high schools, I'm used to being swarmed by students. Usually, as soon as my lecture ends, they run up to hand me their résumés, fighting for my attention so that they can tell me about their internships or summer science programs.

But last spring, after I spoke at a New Jersey public school, I ran into an entirely different kind of student.

When the bell rang, I stuffed my leftover pamphlets into a bag and began to navigate the human tsunami that is a high school hallway at lunchtime.

Just before I reached the parking lot, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, ma'am," a student said, smiling through a set of braces. "You dropped a granola bar on the floor in the cafeteria. I chased you down since I thought you'd want your snack." Before I could even thank him, he handed me the bar and dissolved into the sea of teenagers.

Working in undergraduate admissions at Dartmouth College has introduced me to many talented young people. I used to be the director of international admissions and am now working part time after having a baby. Every year I'd read over 2,000 college applications from students all over the world. The applicants are always intellectually curious and talented. They climb mountains, head extracurricular clubs and develop new technologies. They're the next generation's leaders. Their accomplishments stack up quickly.

The problem is that in a deluge of promising candidates, many remarkable students become indistinguishable from one another, at least on paper. It is incredibly difficult to choose whom to admit. Yet in the chaos of SAT scores, extracurriculars and recommendations, one quality is always irresistible in a candidate: kindness. It's a trait that would be hard to pinpoint on applications even if colleges asked the right questions. Every so often, though, it can't help shining through.

The most surprising indication of kindness I've ever come across in my admissions career came from a student who went to a large public school in New England. He was clearly bright, as evidenced by his class rank and teachers' praise. He had a supportive recommendation from his college counselor and an impressive list of extracurriculars. Even with these qualifications, he

might not have stood out. But one letter of recommendation caught my eye. It was from a school custodian.

Letters of recommendation are typically superfluous, written by people who the applicant thinks will impress a school. We regularly receive letters from former presidents, celebrities, trustee relatives and Olympic athletes. But they generally fail to provide us with another angle on who the student is, or could be as a member of our community.

This letter was different.

The custodian wrote that he was compelled to support this student's candidacy because of his thoughtfulness. This young man was the only person in the school who knew the names of every member of the janitorial staff. He turned off lights in empty rooms, consistently thanked the hallway monitor each morning and tidied up after his peers even if nobody was watching. This student, the custodian wrote, had a refreshing respect for every person at the school, regardless of position, popularity or clout.

Over 15 years and 30,000 applications in my admissions career, I had never seen a recommendation from a school custodian. It gave us a window onto a student's life in the moments when nothing "counted." That student was admitted by unanimous vote of the admissions committee.

There are so many talented applicants and precious few spots. We know how painful this must be for students. As someone who was rejected by the school where I ended up as a director of admissions, I know firsthand how devastating the words "we regret to inform you" can be.

Until admissions committees figure out a way to effectively recognize the genuine but intangible personal qualities of applicants, we must rely on little things to make the difference. Sometimes an inappropriate email address is more telling than a personal essay. The way a student acts toward his parents on a campus tour can mean as much as a standardized test score. And, as I learned from that custodian, a sincere character evaluation from someone unexpected will mean more to us than any boilerplate recommendation from a former president or famous golfer.

Next year there might be a flood of custodian recommendations thanks to this essay. But if it means students will start paying as much attention to the people who clean their classrooms as they do to their principals and teachers, I'm happy to help start that trend.

Colleges should foster the growth of individuals who show promise not just in leadership and academics, but also in generosity of spirit. Since becoming a mom, I've also been looking at applications differently. I can't help anticipating my son's own dive into the college admissions frenzy 17 years from now.

Whether or not he even decides to go to college when the time is right, I want him to resemble a person thoughtful enough to return a granola bar, and gracious enough to respect every person in his community.

Rebecca Sabky is a former admissions director at Dartmouth.