

KEY FACTORS IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

As you start your college search and admissions process, it is helpful to understand what colleges look for in applicants and how they build their incoming freshman class. Most U.S. colleges generally take a holistic approach when they evaluate applications; they consider both academic and non-academic factors. The academic factors (your high school transcript and perceived level of interest in academic subjects, standardized test scores, and teacher/counselor recommendations) are the most important, but the other factors (application essays, involvement in/leadership of extracurricular activities, special talents, character, and perceived level of interest in attending a specific college) are also important. Knowing what colleges care about will help you in the admissions process.

High School Transcript: While good grades will give you more college options, so, too, will a strong academic program. The more selective the college, the stronger or more advanced your program needs to be. Your transcript, which reflects academic rigor as well as grades, is probably the single most important factor that colleges will consider. As described in more detail in the section on High School Curriculum, your four year curriculum and the choices you make about which classes to take are very important.

Standardized Test Scores: The large majority of colleges also value scores from either the SAT or ACT. Some of the more selective colleges also value SAT Subject Test scores and AP Exam scores, in some cases more than SAT or ACT scores, because they indicate knowledge acquired in the classroom. Standardized tests are a way for colleges to compare students from different high schools and many feel they are a good predictor of how students will do in college. An increasing number of colleges, however, believe that your transcript is a better predictor and as a result do not require test scores. These colleges put much more weight on the strength of the transcript. So if you do well in the classroom but have difficulty with standardized tests, you might want to consider including some test-optional colleges on your list. **It is important to note that high test scores generally do not offset a weak transcript; such students look like under-achievers and should allocate more time to class work than prepping to increase their scores.**

Teacher Recommendations: The third important academic factor is what your teachers say about you as a student. Colleges want to know how engaged you are in the classroom and how interested you are in the material. They want to know whether you contribute to and help lead class discussions. And, of course, they want to know how strong a student you are. If you actively participate in your classes and demonstrate genuine interest in the material, you will not only do better but also have a better chance of getting a strong recommendation. Choose teachers who have come to know and respect you as a student. Sometimes that might mean a teacher who has seen you work hard to achieve in their class as opposed to a teacher of a class where you easily earned high grades.

Extracurricular Activities: Unlike universities in most other countries, U.S. colleges value students who are active outside the classroom on the athletic field, the stage, and/or the local community because such students are likely to continue to be involved in similar pursuits in college and thereby contribute to student life. Colleges value students who have

talent and are willing to share their talent. If the talent is significant—a state champion athlete, for example—their admission chances may improve. Colleges also value **leaders**, students who lead or have started a student organization, who encourage other students to join them, who inspire and help other students to do better in a particular activity. Such students will probably be leaders in college, and later in life, and therefore enhance a college community. If active and/or talented students also are strong academically (and vice versa), they will stand better chances in the admissions process. It is more important to focus your efforts on a small number of activities where you can have a larger impact rather than spreading yourself across many activities.

Application Essays: What you say about yourself and how you say it in your application essays are important to most colleges; some of the large state universities, however, may look primarily at your transcript and test scores. Both the quality of your writing and the content or message are considered. Colleges want to learn about who you are, what moves or interests you, and what your goals are. They also want to get a sense of your personality and character. Are you someone who is a team player, who helps others, who cares about and does something about issues of concern to you? They also want to get a sense for your intellect and how you think. Good essays are well-written, show clarity of thought, and reveal something meaningful about who you are, how you think, and what you will bring to the college campus.

Demonstrated Interest: It is important to show any college where you apply that you are genuinely interested in them. At a time when colleges are receiving growing numbers of applications, many from equally qualified students, they need to determine which students are serious about attending versus those who might be using them as a back-up or “Likely.” The percentage of students accepted by a college who decide to attend is known as the “yield.” Higher yield numbers are one of the measures by which colleges are ranked and administrators are evaluated so colleges want to keep them as high as possible. Therefore, they are more likely to accept a student who has demonstrated genuine interest by visiting their campus, interviewing, or meeting with an admissions representative at their high school than a “stealth applicant” who comes out of nowhere with no prior contact.

Other Factors: Many colleges consider the following additional factors when evaluating applicants:

- Whether or not the applicant has a parent who graduated from the college. Applicants who are “legacies” may receive preferential consideration in the admissions process, most other factors being equal.
- Whether or not the applicant represents an “under-represented” constituency and would contribute to the diversity of the student community (e.g., an international student applying to a college with relatively few international students would be attractive to that college).
- The ability to pay full tuition. Colleges that are “need-aware” and have relatively scarce financial aid resources may prefer applicants who can pay the entire cost of college.