

What Do Colleges Look For in Prospective Students?*

Five Popular Myths:

People will tell you all sorts of stories and “facts” about how colleges’ admissions offices make decisions, and some of them are pretty wild. Be careful about what you believe. Something isn’t true just because someone says it. If you hear something about college admissions that concerns you, ask your counselor or a college admissions representative if you were given false information.

Every college is different, and colleges have admissions criteria that vary from one to the other. However, in nearly all cases, the following myths are far from the truth.

Myth #1: “Take the easiest classes you can because you’ll have a higher GPA, and that’s what will get you into that competitive college!”

That has been a very common rumor. Ask yourself if it makes sense. Pretend you are a college admissions person at a competitive school, and you want to accept a great class of incoming freshmen who will be successful and graduate on time, ready to embark on great adventures and make tremendous contributions to society as alumni of your school.

What would you think about someone who coasted through easy classes earning easy grades and a high GPA without ever accepting a challenge? You would be right to wonder if that student has the motivation, stamina, preparation, and thirst for knowledge that you are looking for in your students.

Myth #2: “Colleges Prefer the SAT because they know that the ACT is easier.”

This is false. With one or two odd exceptions, all of the colleges and universities in the United States accept both tests, and they have no preference. It’s true that most students in the East take SAT and most students in the Midwest take ACT, but that is just a reflection of where the SAT and ACT companies are located (New Jersey and Iowa, respectively).

Neither test is easier or harder than the other. They are just different. You may find that one matches your abilities and styles better than another, and another person will have opposite results. If possible, take both the ACT and SAT in spring of junior year, and see how you do. Take at least one of them again in fall of senior year. You should always check all of the requirements for the colleges that interest you as early as possible to make sure you have taken all required tests, etc.

Myth #3: “I should join as many clubs as I can. It will give me lots of things to put on my applications and will make me look better.”

Well, it’s true that it will give you a lot to write on your application, but it won’t help you at all.

Again, look at this from the point of view of an admissions officer:

You have to choose between two students who each spend time each week in activities. The first student belongs to six different clubs. He shows up to most meetings, but he doesn’t actually do much else because his time and attention are split between six groups. His participation doesn’t have much effect on the clubs, and they wouldn’t suffer if he dropped out.

The second student belongs to two clubs. She attends every meeting and is also an elected officer in one club. Last year, she actually developed her own idea for a fundraiser and organized the whole event from start to finish. This year she has new ideas to implement and continues to do a great deal of work for both clubs. When she gets involved in a project, she takes a leadership role, even when she’s not an elected leader. She demonstrates enthusiasm and commitment.

As a college admissions officer, which student do you think will have a greater impact on your campus and help make your college a better place?

Myth #4: "I know that my grades aren't so good, but I'll get in because I have family members who went to that school."

For better or worse, alumni connections won't make up for a deficient profile. In most cases, those connections won't make any difference at all. If the college named a building after your grandfather, then you may be an exception, but, otherwise, you should expect to be judged based on the strength of your application just like everyone else. The days of counting on being a legacy are over.

Myth #5: "I won't get in because too many other people from my high school applied."

Think about that statement for a moment. If you are a great candidate for a competitive school, do you really think that they will pass on you just because they already accepted someone else from your high school? It's not likely, and you can easily find dozens of examples every year of many students in the same graduating classes accepted to the same top universities. (BA's Class of 2016 had 10 accepted to UGA>) So, if you find out that four other students from your high school have also decided to apply to the competitive school that is at the top of your list, don't lose sleep over it.

The truth is that it's not fun to be denied admission to a school, and people search for all sorts of reasons for denial, especially when they are well qualified. The truth is, however, that competitive schools receive many more applications from qualified students than they could possibly accept. In most cases, you'll never know why you didn't get in, but it is almost certainly not because of competition within your high school.

The Truth & The Inside Information

So, then, what really does influence admissions decisions? Below are several potential factors that can affect college admissions decisions. Think about them for a moment. Circle the five factors you expect are most important and put those five in rank order based on what you would expect an admissions office to consider. Why do you think these factors are so important?

- Class Rank
- Extracurricular Activities
- Interview
- Counselor Recommendation
- Grades in College Prep Courses
- Essay or Writing Sample
- SAT/ACT Scores
- Strength of Curriculum
- Grades in All Courses
- SAT Subject Test Scores
- Job/Employment History
- AP Scores
- Student's Demonstrated Interest
- Teacher Recommendation
- Counselor Recommendation

Look at the top few factors:

Grades in College Prep Courses

Everyone knows that grades are important, but why are they at or near the top of the list? You have earned all sorts of grades during your high school years, and those grades tell your story in detail over time. Grades measure your progress and the quality of your work over three or more years, not just for four hours on a Saturday morning like an SAT/ACT test. The grades in your college preparatory courses are most important because they are more likely to be accurate predictors of success in college.

Strength of Curriculum

This term refers to the courses you chose to take. Did you take some challenging courses, particularly AP and/or Honors courses, or did you always take the safest, easiest courses?

Colleges want to accept people who are likely to be successful students, and those who take AP and other demanding courses tend to be better prepared and more successful in college. Also, colleges can learn a lot about you by your choices. One competitive college stated a while back that they denied admission that year to over 80 students who had perfect 4.0 GPAs because the students never tried to challenge themselves. Many students are capable of doing good work, but a college wants to admit students who have intellectual curiosity and who want to learn just for the sake of learning. People who only do what is required tend not to be the vibrant, enthusiastic learners that colleges desire to have in their classrooms.

You can help yourself by taking the most challenging courses that you can reasonably and successfully handle. Be realistic and don't overload yourself, but step up to the plate and challenge yourself. Force yourself to learn new and better study habits.

SAT/ACT Scores

Although standardized testing has its faults, these tests have proven to be very good predictors of college success. Many students ask about what a good SAT or ACT score is, but that will all depend on where you want to apply. Even though these scores are important, remember that grades and strength of curriculum come first. Some students do well on SAT/ACT tests and then think that will make up for very poor grades. However, colleges know how to spot students who can do great work on one Saturday morning but won't work hard in their classes all year long.

Grades in All Courses

Even though your grades in college preparatory classes are extremely important, most colleges still consider other grades as well. So, those good grades you earned in your favorite chorus class may still be useful for you.

Essay or Writing Sample

The inability to write well is a problem for many college students these days, so colleges must try their best to accept students who are good, solid writers. Be yourself when you write your essay. Otherwise, you'll sound phony. Ask for some help, but submit an essay that is an original piece of interesting writing. Colleges are good at spotting essays that have been written by many hands.

Counselor/Teacher Recommendation

Many schools do not consider or ask for counselor recommendations, but a whole bunch of them do. Always check your applications early to see if you need a recommendation. If so, give your counselor/teacher plenty of notice (at least two weeks) so that she/he can have time to write the best possible letter for you. Make sure your counselor is aware of all of your achievements and wonderful deeds, as well as any unusual circumstances that need to be explained.

*Revised and reprinted.