

What Are Colleges Looking For?*

What are college admission officers looking for when they read your application? They take into account more than your GPA and test scores. Your character and the personal qualities you can bring to a college are important too. That's why you need to think about your goals, accomplishments and personal values and figure out how you can best express those in your applications.

Colleges look for qualities like leadership and a sense of social responsibility.

The Qualities Colleges Want

"What is it that makes you unique, and how will you contribute to the life of our campus?" That's what admission officers want to know, according to Earl Johnson, dean of admission at the University of Tulsa. To gauge what students can bring to their campus, they look for these types of qualities:

- Leadership
- A willingness to take risks
- Initiative
- A sense of social responsibility
- A commitment to service
- Special talents or abilities

Overall, colleges want a mix of students to create a rich campus community. They want the class valedictorians, says Marty O'Connell, executive director of Colleges That Change Lives. But they also are looking for "students who are going to be involved in a lot of activities and students who are musicians and students who are athletes and everything in between."

Your Application Shows Your Qualities

So how do you show colleges what's special about you? Personal qualities are not easy to measure, but admission officers look at the items listed below for clues to an applicant's character.

- **Extracurricular activities:** What you do outside the classroom reveals a lot about you. That's why some applications ask for details about extracurricular activities. But remember, it's not the number of activities that's important. Admission officers want to know what you've learned and how you've grown from participating in these activities.
- **Summer jobs and activities:** Your summer experiences provide insight into your character. And holding summer job at a fast-food restaurant can build as much character as attending a prestigious summer learning program. It's all about what you've gained, what you've learned and how you communicate that.
- **College essay:** The college essay gives you the opportunity to show the admission officers who you are and how you will contribute to the college campus.

Mike Sexton, vice president for enrollment management at Santa Clara University, says that when admission officers read student essays, they ask themselves, "Would you like this person to be your roommate? Would you like to work on a group project with this person?" The essay can reveal the answers to these questions more than any test score can.

Letters of recommendation: Recommendation letters can tell a lot about the kind of person you are. A teacher who knows you well can give insight into not just your academic strengths but also the qualities you display in class, such as leadership or fairness.

***Revised and reprinted**