

Help your students understand what really matters to colleges

There's no magic formula when it comes to college admission decisions. So how do you advise students on admission factors when they vary so widely from one college to the next?

Students should know that many factors influence admission decisions, including:

- Courses taken
- Grades received
- Class rank
- Standardized test scores
- Personal statements and essays
- Recommendations
- Extracurricular activities
- Interviews

Which factors most affect the admission decision?

Many small, selective colleges pay greater attention to personal statements and essays, teacher and counselor recommendations, leadership experiences and the individual talents of applicants. They typically offer the chance for a face-to-face interview.

Large, public state university systems often use a mathematical formula based on a student's grade point average (GPA) and scores on the SAT or ACT. They tend to favor in-state applicants.

Regardless of the college's evaluation system, your students should present a well-rounded picture of their skills, experience and personal traits. Applications should highlight their ability to succeed at each particular institution and what they can contribute to student life on campus.

Courses and grades

A student's grades in college-preparatory classes remain the most significant factor in college admission decisions.

Highly selective colleges look for students who:

- Complete core academic requirements.
- Take more challenging classes, even though they may have slightly lower grades than they'd achieve in lower-level courses.
- Enroll in several college-prep or college-level courses (such as AP) and perform well.
- Take four years of a world language, showing evidence of academic discipline and challenge.

Class rank

Although still reviewed by many colleges, class rank has declined in significance as many private and religious schools have eliminated student ranking.

Test scores

Standardized test scores remain important at many colleges. Examinations such as the SAT and SAT Subject Tests™, or the ACT, allow colleges to compare students from across the country.

Essays

Personal statements and essays are both a measure of writing ability and a window into each student's background. Admission officers want to hear an original voice in the student's own words. For a successful essay, encourage students to get to the point quickly and personalize their writing through specific examples.

Recommendations from counselors and teachers

At selective colleges, strong school support in the form of recommendations from counselors and faculty members has become more important than ever. These recommendations should be highly specific, describing not just each student's love of learning, but the ways in which the students have demonstrated that they can

- Add to the classroom experience.
- Challenge themselves.
- Attempt original projects.

Extracurricular activities

Evidence of extracurricular activities is important to the admission process, and depth of involvement is more impressive than breadth. Students can achieve this if they

- Focus on a limited number of interests.
- Document long-term involvement with organizations.
- Highlight activities related to a major or career goal.
- Show leadership skills and ability.

Interviews

Some schools offer interviews. It is usually an advantage in admission decisions for a student to take advantage of the opportunity

Additional factors to consider

Many colleges set aside spaces for students who may not meet traditional criteria but will add to the class diversity. Geographic location, racial or ethnic background, extenuating or unusual life circumstances and experience living or studying overseas may all be influential. Evidence suggests that in some cases applying early decision may also increase the chances of admission.

College Board Resources for

Professionals: <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/decisions>