



What Admissions Officers Look For

What are the biggest factors in making a great impression?

Ask admissions officers what 3 elements are the most important in the admissions process and the answer will likely be courses, courses, and courses. Their job is to bring to campus those students whom the faculty will most want to teach. Although it doesn't always hold true, the consensus is that the best measure of a student's potential in college is his or her performance in high school.

The Transcript

Most students think their transcripts are not a true reflection of their abilities. That's not what admissions officers think. Most admissions officers read the transcript as a dynamic, multi-dimensional document that speaks to your level of motivation. Have you taken advantage of the most challenging parts of the available curriculum? Have you demonstrated range, depth, and breadth in the courses you've taken - and shown a willingness to try new things? Most importantly, is there a trend? Are you maturing and gaining strength in the upper

grades—or taking it easy? The transcript is like a relief map of your high school experience.

Covid-19 has affected grading at many schools. The difference in grades between a top and average student may be narrower. This makes it even more important to take courses as challenging as you can handle.

Test Scores

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, over 1 million students per year took one of the two major standardized tests – the SAT and the ACT. Tests are one of many factors colleges use to decide whom to admit. Many of the more selective schools used test scores as a way of narrowing their very large pools of applicants, other schools used them to determine the size of merit scholarships.

The pandemic has upended this arrangement somewhat. Over 70% of colleges have gone test-optional for the 2021-22 academic year. A college

with a test-optional policy gives students the option to not submit test scores to that school. If you decide not to submit your test scores, the rest of your application, such as your grades, essays, extracurricular activities, and achievements, must be strong enough to be admit. Over 400 colleges intend to be test optional for the 2022-23 academic year - with many stating they plan to be test-optional permanently. However, you can always choose to take the SATs or ACTs – but not submit the scores if you're dissatisfied with the results.

When a student has high test scores but mediocre grades, it raises questions about motivation. Is the student bright but lazy? The admissions office must be satisfied that there isn't an underlying poor work ethic.

Conversely, the student with very high grades and low test scores also raises questions. How does this school compare to other high schools? Is there grade inflation at the school? How demanding was the course load? Your test scores are part of interpreting your transcript.

The Personal Essay

The personal essay allows each applicant a terrific opportunity to help admissions officers read the map more accurately. In addition to articulating your goals, dreams, and expectations, you can also explain any gaps or changes in your record. The essay is your chance to take some control in the admissions process and make your own case.

The common app has provided an opportunity for students to share how COVID has affected their lives. Did a family member come down with Covid? Did a parent lose a job or were cut back? This is your chance to share how the pandemic has affected you and your family.

Admissions officers certainly look for writing ability. But they also look for originality and logic. They want to gain a fuller sense of your abilities and aspirations. The most effective essays convey

an authentic voice, something that admissions officers recognize and appreciate. The authentic voice doesn't come from trying to satisfy the reader, counselors, or parents. It comes through when the writer conveys a true essence of his or her own personality and gives the reader a deeper understanding of individual strengths.

Extracurricular Activities

Most applications ask you to list your accomplishments and extracurricular activities. Some students obsess about these and join lots of activities, especially in their senior year. Trying to improve the look of your application this way screams of superficiality!

Colleges are more interested in a sustained involvement borne from your true interests. A person with a singular interest, pursued with passion, is far more appealing than someone who touches lightly on many activities.

Colleges will be looking for creativity during COVID. Did you do online volunteering, online tutoring, take an extra class, perhaps started an online club? If you are an athlete did you set up a dedicated workout routine?

Recommendations

For recommendations, colleges want to hear from a few people who know you well and can write convincingly about your abilities - not a long list of important people with whom you've had limited interaction. A compelling recommendation may come from a teacher who gave you a B but speaks of your determination and tenacity in pursuing a subject that does not come easily to you.

A Final Point

Most institutions are looking for a reason to admit you, not keep you out. View the application, transcript, recommendations, and personal essay as instruments over which you have control. Use them to build a clear and convincing argument.