

College Admissions: What Do Colleges Want?

From AdmissionsAdvice.com BY CAROLYN Z. LAWRENCE

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To an outsider, college admissions decisions can often seem baffling. Why did the valedictorian at our high school not get into Harvard? How the heck did that quiet bookish girl who always sat in the back of the classroom get into Brown? Why did this science nerd I know get into MIT but not Cal Tech? I wrote a *really* great essay - why didn't I get into Stanford?

It can be dangerous to read too much into the admissions experiences of other people. While you may know a few basic facts about a particular student, unless you've had access to their entire application package, and sat in on the admissions committee's discussion about whether to admit or deny the student, you won't have the full story about why things turned out the way they did for that particular student. And, of course, what ultimately matters is *not* how things turned out for someone else, but how they'll turn out for *you*.

In finalizing your college list, it can be helpful to remember the number of factors colleges and universities use to determine which applicants to admit. By honestly evaluating how you measure up to these factors, and what you have to offer the colleges on your list, you can get a fairly accurate impression of the strength of your overall admissions profile.

Although the weight placed on these admissions factors may differ from college to college, most colleges will focus on the following factors, in order of importance:

Objectives and Needs of The College: Every college admissions office has objectives and needs to fulfill as they make admissions decisions. Topping every college's list is the need to make sure that all of the seats in the freshman class next year are filled with bright and eager students. College admissions officers are often under pressure to satisfy different constituencies, such as faculty, donors, alumni, and trustees. As a result, they may need to fill specific needs with their admissions decisions, including everything from finding students interested in majoring in a particular department to making sure the financial aid budget is balanced to improving racial, economic, and geographic diversity on campus. Many colleges also face pressure to improve the college's public standing, be it through improved rankings, a growing endowment, or bragging rights about the quality of applicants who were turned away. All of these factors can influence the way individual applicants are viewed by an admissions committee. While you can't control all of the needs and objectives the admissions committee will be facing, it's important to keep in mind that your application, when it is read, will be read in light of them. While you can't predict with certainty which institutional needs will weigh most heavily when the admissions committee meets, researching each college on your final list carefully can help you understand some of the factors that might affect your chances, above and beyond your individual qualifications. The strongest "hook" for any applicant is filling an important need or objective of the admissions committee.

Grades: In terms of individual applicant qualifications, **grades are the single most important factor in the admissions decision.** Colleges believe that a sustained academic effort over a long period of time is the best indicator of perseverance and academic potential, both of which are necessary qualities for success in higher education. As a general rule, your grades in junior year and the first semester of senior year will be the most important ones to an admissions committee. If your grades show consistently good performance from 9th grade on, that will be viewed most positively. If your grades have steadily improved over the years, that too will be a plus in your favor. However, if your grades have fluctuated wildly, shown consistent poor performance in one or more academic areas, or shown a steady drop over the years, you may have fewer college options. Even so, don't rule yourself out of the college ballgame: every motivated student can attend college, although students who have grade point averages below 2.0 may need to start in a less competitive environment, such as a community college.

Quality of High School Curriculum: Along with looking at your grades, admissions officers will look closely at the quality and rigor of the courses you've taken in high school. Colleges and universities want students who have challenged themselves in high school by making the most of the academic

opportunities available to them. Colleges and universities look favorably on AP and honors courses, and they also prefer students who take four years of core academic courses, such as math, science, foreign languages, and social sciences. However, this doesn't mean that earning poor grades in the toughest courses is OK. While you should try to take the most challenging courses possible, your grades are important as well, so strive for the most challenging course load *you* personally can succeed and do well in. That will vary for each student, so plan your curriculum wisely: keep it challenging, but try to avoid setting yourself up for failure with a curriculum that is too challenging for your skill level.

Standardized Test Scores: Your performance on college entrance exams, such as the ACT and SAT, is important to most colleges and universities. Colleges consider these exams to be objective and standardized measures of aptitude and achievement. They are a tool colleges use to compare you to other applicants. However, keep in mind that grades and strength of curriculum are always weighed more heavily than test scores. It is better to have great grades, and somewhat less stellar test scores than great test scores and poor grades. Test scores alone, even perfect scores, will not get you, or anyone, into college by themselves. Test scores are just a piece of the admissions picture for an admissions committee, not the whole ball of wax. If you feel your test scores don't adequately reflect your academic potential, don't give up hope: there are currently over 750 colleges that don't require applicants to submit standardized test scores to be admitted.

Recommendations: Many colleges ask applicants to send recommendation letters from teachers and their school counselor describing the student's academic potential and personal characteristics. In teacher recommendations, colleges are especially looking for a first-hand evaluation of the student's potential to succeed in college-level work and contribute to the academic community of the college. College admissions people hope that recommendation letters will give them a sense of who the applicant is, their readiness for success in college, how the applicant compares to his peers at the high school, and the personal qualities and contributions the student might bring to the college campus. Solid recommendation letters can be a tipping point for a good candidate, but in and of themselves, they won't erase a history of lackluster academic performance.

Extracurricular Activities: Colleges and universities prefer to admit students who will contribute to the campus community both inside and outside of the classroom. In looking at applications from prospective students, many schools will therefore pay particular attention to how you've contributed in the past. Have you been involved with clubs and organizations in high school and your community? Have you played sports? Do you have a special talent? However, keep in mind that quality involvement is more important than the quantity of organizations you can list on your application. Making genuine contributions to fewer activities is generally much more impressive to colleges than belonging to many organizations but contributing little to any of them. I will be talking more about extracurriculars in the next few days.

Essays: Many colleges ask students to provide one or more essays as part of their applications. Essays can help admissions people get a three-dimensional sense of who you are, what motivates you, and what you may contribute to their campus community. However, students often think that a terrific essay alone will supersede everything else in their application. Typically, however, well-written and thoughtful essays can nudge well-qualified applicants into the admit pile. I will also be talking more about essays in the coming weeks.

Personal Characteristics: In making the final decision about who to admit, colleges want to know more about you than just your test scores and grades. They will try to get a sense of the personal characteristics you may bring to campus. They may look for evidence that an applicant has overcome adversity, been a good citizen, is self-motivated, or has real intellectual curiosity through interviews, recommendation letters, and essays. College admissions officers will also look for personal characteristics that may help the college fill special needs or meet objectives, such as the desire for greater diversity, improved rankings, or a balanced financial aid budget.

POSTED BY CAROLYN Z. LAWRENCE

FACT VS. FICTION IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS

from *The College Finder* by Steven R. Antonoff, Ph.D.
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Myth: The only college worth attending is an Ivy League, Top Ten, or Upper Tier school.

Ivy League colleges are fine institutions, and some students should seek them out. But an Ivy League education is not right for everyone, not even every outstanding, high-achieving student. The truth is that in the 20 years that I've been on the college beat, American higher education has only grown stronger. It's surprising to me that the perception of quality has not kept up with the reality of quality. Colleges today enroll better-prepared and brighter students. Faculty quality, in both teaching and research, has taken great strides. Students can take advantage of remarkable new facilities and resources. Rather than just the handful of "good" colleges, there are 100—even 200—top-tier colleges in the United States, as well as hundreds more that will provide extraordinary opportunities for their students. *The College Finder* will give you the names of colleges that experts consider comparable in quality to better-known schools.

Myth: You have to be a stellar student to get into a good college.

The truth is you don't need all As or even all Bs to be admitted to a terrific school. Yes, there are about 40 schools that accept fewer than half of their applicants, but the vast majority of the more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. accept well over 80 percent of those who apply. The B student with average ACT or SAT scores can get into literally thousands of colleges (and good ones, too).

Myth: A degree from a "name" college is the only way to get ahead in life.

The truth is that most employers want the best person they can find, regardless of the university whose name is on the diploma. It is your success during your four undergraduate years that determines your career prospects or graduate school potential. A strong grade point average, good recommendations, and commitment to campus life and community responsibility are the most important factors to success after college.

A corollary holds that the goal of college planning is to find the college that looks best on your resume. The truth is that college choice should be about what you do during college, not what you will do *after* you graduate. I have seen students so focused on the getting in that they have never taken the time to think about the four years they'll spend on campus.

Myth: You have to be rich to go to college these days.

Going to college in the 21st century isn't cheap, but the truth is families don't need the wealth of Bill Gates to afford the cost of college today. Too often, parents believe that, because of cost, their student has no option but the local state school. Not true. Many schools provide a high-quality academic experience at a reasonable price, and there are many types of financial aid available. Even at expensive private colleges, students rarely pay the full "sticker price" (the amount of tuition and room and board listed by the colleges).

A related myth claims that only a handful of colleges in the country are worth the price. The truth is that given the quality of higher education in the U.S. today and the level of resources, faculty, and facilities at many colleges and universities, numerous schools represent a worthwhile investment in your future.

Myth: The best colleges are the most selective ones.

Although there is some minor correlation, the truth is that selectivity doesn't always translate to higher quality. Numerous factors drive selectivity. Popularity, location, athletic success, even the money spent on marketing can all contribute to a college's selectivity. And "best" is a subjective term; in the end, the "best" school is the one that's right for you.

It's a myth to assume that when we talk of best colleges, we are talking about only a few. With more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. alone, you should never feel that you won't find the right place

to go to school. But sheer numbers tell only part of the story. The variety of colleges is amazing. There is a college for everyone or (more accurately) many college for every student.

Colleges are neither equal nor identical. Besides the obvious differences in size, academic offerings, and location, each school has a unique ethic, culture, and feel—all of which can either be growth-producing or growth-inhibiting, depending on the individual. Colleges differ in terms of their admission requirements, academic intensity, conventional versus alternative approaches to education, focus on careers, study abroad opportunities, cost and aid availability, character of the student body (from deeply academic to fun-loving, religious to outdoorsy, and homogeneous to diverse), campus safety, residence hall life, athletic strength (for both participant and spectator), and overall quality. These are just some of the topics covered in *The College Finder*.

As college vary, so do students. You have a unique set of needs and wants. It is the match between you and the college that ultimately determines your academic and social comfort....

...*The College Finder* is designed to help you and your parents move beyond these and other misconceptions and really explore your options.

Community Service Hours Forms

A minimum of 100 hours are required for transcript or President's Award recognition. For transcripts, the service can be completed *anytime* during your 4 years at Paly. For the President's Award, the service needs to be completed *within any 12-calendar-month period*. When your verification forms are complete, *with a minimum total of 100 hours*, please submit to Christina Owen in the College and Career Center. She will report your hours to the Registrar for transcripts.

Use the Community Service Verification Forms to record your hours as you work them. Have the forms signed by the site managers where you volunteer, or if no site manager, see Mrs. Owen for a verification signature.

You can have Community Service hours from more than one agency; just use a separate form for each one.

Community Service (15 hours) is a requirement for the Living Skills class, which most Paly students take during their sophomore or junior year. For this class, *turn your hours in first to your teacher; then you may add those hours to make the 100+* for transcripts or the President's Award.

Your 100+ Community Service hours can be noted on your Paly transcript for college applications by turning in the verification form. By completing 100 hours or more and by filling out the proper application, you will also be eligible for the President's Volunteer Service Award. There are 2 President's Award ceremonies each school year, Fall and Spring. Deadlines for verification forms and applications will be posted on the paly.net calendar and in the Bulletin.

President's Award:

Hours must be completed within any consecutive 12-month period.

100-174 hours of community service: BRONZE AWARD

175-249 hours of community service: SILVER AWARD

250+ hours of community service: GOLD AWARD!!

For questions about service opportunities, please check with Christina Owen in the College and Career Center (cowen@pausd.org) and visit the PAUSD PTSA Community Service web page on Paly.net. You may also download the verification form and President's Award application from this site:

Helpful community service information can be found at the following sites:

www.dosomething.org

www.handsonbayarea.org

www.presidentialserviceawards.gov

www.volunteermatch.org

binasblogforgoodworks.blogspot.com/

Book List

Always Accept Me for Who I Am: Instructions from Teenagers on Raising the Perfect Parent by 147 Teens Who Know

J.S. Salt

Field Guide to the American Teenager

Joseph & DiPrisco & Michael Riera

How to Talk to Teens About Really Important Things: Specific Questions and Answers

Charles E. Shaefer & Teresa Foy Digeronimo

Parents, Teens, and Boundaries; How to Draw the Line

Jane Bluestein

Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers

Michael Riera