

Understanding How Colleges Analyze YOU

I thought it might be helpful to talk about what colleges are looking for when they sit down to review application files and select an entering class. While it undoubtedly varies from campus to campus and admission committee to admission committee, there are some general rules of thumb about what factors they most seriously consider and what their aims are in the process.

1) **Academic Record** - The single most important factor in the eyes of most admission committees is the academic record of the student. Committees look closely at the course schedule of the student over the years, with a preference for Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses, as well as the grades received. Trends in courses and grades are also important, with the most recent work of the student being the most significant. (This means no dropping off and coasting through the senior year!)

2) **SAT/ACT Scores** - While some colleges are reconsidering the weight they place on test scores, with some dropping test scores as an admission requirement altogether, they remain a common and frequently analyzed application element. Most colleges accept either the SAT or ACT and usually will take the best combination of scores a student may have on the various sections, if they have taken the testes) multiple times.

3) **Extracurricular Activities** - Colleges analyze how students spend their free time, not only so they can ascertain whether or not the student may be well suited to life on their campuses, but also to help put the academic record in perspective. Students should keep a running list of activities and accomplishments throughout the high school years and note those on the application, in addition to time spent working a part-time job and/or other "real world" experiences.

4) **Essays or Personal Statements** - Although not all colleges require a personal essay, herein lies an opportunity for a student to truly distinguish himself. Colleges are looking to get some insight into who the student truly is, so be sure you focus on relaying the "who" and "why" of who you are and forget about writing what you think they want to hear.

5) **Recommendations** - The number required and who they must be from may vary slightly, although almost all will require at least a counselor's recommendation. Be sure those writing your recommendations know you well enough to speak to your strengths and will be supportive of you in what they have to say.

6) **Student's Interest and Perceived "Fit"** - Colleges are looking for students who will help round out their student bodies and who really want to be on their campuses. All colleges have certain institutional priorities which may vary slightly from year to year and over time. For example, a college may be looking to expand some new technology- related programs recently launched and may look for additional students who are interested in pursuing such majors in an attempt to help spur the growth of the new programs. Regardless of a college's area(s) of particular interest, all colleges are searching for students who want to come (and stay!) at their institutions.

Although the many applications and required information may feel pretty "standard," know that colleges are carefully trying to draw distinctions between your application and those of hundreds of others. Take the process seriously and be sure to put your best foot forward. Make sure all materials arrive before the designated deadlines in the desired format(s) and that everything with your name on it is neat, clear and complete. Good luck!