

Admissions Decisions: What Counts

Although there's no magic formula when it comes to college admissions decisions, students should know that many factors influence admissions decisions including:

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

Which factors most affect the admissions decision?

Many small, selective schools 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, 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 in these courses
- Enroll in several college-prep courses—[such as AP® courses](#)—and perform well

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 ACT, allow colleges to compare students from across the country.

Recommendations from Counselors and Teachers

At selective colleges, strong school support in the form of recommendations from counselors and or 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 and challenge themselves.

Extracurricular activities

Evidence of extracurricular activities is important to the admissions 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

Additional factors to consider

Many schools 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 seeking early decision may also increase the chances of admission.