

# How Do Colleges Actually Evaluate Applicants?

Doing college, posted by Elizabeth LaScala, a resident of another community, on Sep 6, 2011 at 8:51 am

Dr. LaScala, Is there any type of objective system that colleges use to discern what students they will accept? They receive so many applications, they must use some decision-making tools. It might help us to put together a more realistic college list if we had an objective way to evaluate our son's profile.

A Reader in San Ramon

Dear Reader,

You are on the right track by helping your student to assemble a realistic college list that is balanced by admission probability. Parents and students frequently ask if schools have a rational, objective method to evaluate the plethora of college applications they receive. There are different college application ranking systems, but one I have found especially useful is based on the ranking systems of some of the nation's most elite colleges and universities. The five main elements of these types of point-based systems include:

- **Grades and Rigor of Coursework (Honors, AP, IB):** This indicator is based on the courses a student chooses over time and the grade trend. Higher points are earned for the most challenging coursework a student can take in the context of what the high school offers. Good and excellent grades earn higher points. Remember, that in the absence of rigor in the high school offerings, students who go outside this environment to pursue academic enrichment (for example, taking a programming class at the local community college during the summer) can strengthen this aspect of the college application.

- **Standardized Test Scores:** This indicator includes the SAT or ACT scores, as well as scores on SAT Subject Tests and AP Exam scores that follow related coursework. Some colleges use an average of the highest SAT scores, others use the highest in a single sitting and still others pick and choose among sittings and use the best scores the students has attained. My preference is to use the highest test scores attained in a single sitting. One frequent question is: "How often should I take the test and do colleges look at this?" My response is to always take a standardized test with proper preparation and with the serious intention of doing your very best work. In this way you will minimize the number of attempts you make to achieve scores that are satisfactory for your top schools. Although schools claim not to notice how often you take the exam, it is a normal human response to register this information as you review an application.

- **The Extracurricular Record (Brag Sheet):** The duration and level of involvement in activities both in and outside of the school environment are important. Colleges are very interested in how students spend their time outside the classroom. This section of the application emphasizes your strengths and should be taken seriously. Help the reader to understand what makes you tick when you are not in the student role. Use the opportunity to highlight activities such as significant community service, employment, summer experiences, general hobbies and interests that take substantial time to pursue, athletics and musical endeavors. This section also includes awards and honors the student has received.

- **Counselor and Teacher Letters of Recommendation:** Readers review and evaluation the quality of the high school counselor's evaluation report as well as the letters teachers write on the applicant's behalf. Sometimes it is appropriate to add an outside letter of personal support, although the school may or may not take it into consideration.

- **The Essays:** This indicator includes all essays and short responses students write for their college applications. In particular, the essay that asks why the student has chosen to apply to its college is important because it demonstrates sincere interest in the college and how well the student has researched the school.

- **Extra Credit Points:** Yes, college applications can receive extra credit points. Although many consider it unfair, the fact remains that legacy, the ability to pay and support the college with monetary gifts (called 'development'), a special gift or talent coveted by the university (exceptional athletic or musical talents), minority and/or first generation to attain a college degree in US can move an application into an 'accept' or, at least, 'review further' status.

In general, grades count more than test scores, and so the student transcript remains the heart of the application. And test scores count more than personal profile information (like extracurricular activities). Still, when many students are applying to the most selective 40 or so colleges nationwide, stellar grades and test scores in all academic areas may characterize 70% or more of the applicant pool. Admission readers must rely heavily on the remaining indicators to distinguish applicants. For example, a less academically rigorous application can remain competitive if the student demonstrates personal qualities, talents and gifts both inside and outside the classroom that are important to the college's mission and institutional priorities. Generally, speaking the academic indicators count for approximately two-thirds of the application and the personal profile components comprise the remaining third of the weighting system. It is important to bear in mind, that 80% of the nation's colleges still accept 80% of their applicants. If highly qualified students apply to the same highly selective private and public colleges in the nation, the competition becomes fierce. If students pay attention to the many factors that make a school a good match for them, and apply broadly to reach, target and good bet schools, they will experience better outcomes and have a more satisfying college experience.

Elizabeth LaScala Ph.D. guides college, transfer and graduate school applicants through the complex world of admissions. She develops best match college lists, offers personalized interview and essay coaching, and tools and strategies to help students tackle each step of the admissions process with confidence and success. Elizabeth helps students from all backgrounds to maximize merit and financial aid awards. Contact her @ (925) 891-4491 or [elizabeth@doingcollege.com](mailto:elizabeth@doingcollege.com).

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