

# What Matters Most to Colleges

It may seem top secret, but colleges are perfectly willing to reveal their most important admission factors.

Colleges typically consider grades in tough courses most important in admissions. Bear in mind, however, that individual colleges vary in the weight they give other factors.

## Top Admission Factors Considered by Colleges

Colleges list the following admission factors as most important, according to The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). The order of the factors below reflects how many colleges rated the factor "Considerably Important" or "Moderately Important."

### Top Factors of Considerable Importance

**Grades in college prep courses.** Most colleges will consider your performance in college preparatory courses the strongest sign of your ability to do well in college. Even if you struggled early in high school, colleges will look favorably upon strong improvement in subsequent years.

**Strength of curriculum.** Colleges look for students who took the most challenging courses available to them. If your high school offers only a few college prep courses, admissions officers will take this into account.

**Admission test scores.** Your SAT and/or ACT scores usually count highly if the college requires them. Scores from SAT Subject Tests, AP tests, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) exams may also be important, especially to more selective colleges.

**Grades in all courses.** Your overall GPA also serves as an indicator of your academic success in high school. The college may also look over your transcript, which lists every class that you have taken in high school and the grade you received in each class.

### Top Factors of Moderate Importance

**Extracurricular commitment.** What counts most to colleges is how long and how deeply you have been committed to one or two interests, how much time you allot to them, what leadership roles you have undertaken, and what you have accomplished.

**Letters of recommendation.** Many colleges require recommendations from your teachers, high school counselor, and possibly your principal. Colleges are looking for an honest professional opinion of your abilities and personality.

**Essay or writing sample.** Many colleges will ask you to submit an essay or personal statement. Here is your opportunity to put your personality into your application. A well-written essay can tip a decision in your favor. A poorly written one can do the opposite.

**Demonstrated interest.** Going on a college visit, talking with admission officers, or doing an enthusiastic interview can call attention to how much you really want to attend. Applying for an early decision may also make a good impression.

**Class rank.** Colleges that use this factor want to see how much competition you had to face to achieve your rank. However, fewer and fewer colleges are giving class rank much importance. In fact, fewer than half of high schools now track class rank.

### **Admission Priorities Vary by Type of College**

- Liberal arts colleges, which encourage students to study broadly, may give factors such as essays and demonstrated interest considerable weight.
- Highly selective colleges attract thousands of outstanding students. These colleges typically look to the "moderately important" factors to make their decisions.
- At very large universities, some admission decisions may be made solely based on GPA and test scores.