

The 10 Most Important Factors in College Admissions



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Much of the stress surrounding college admissions occurs because students and parents possess little first-hand knowledge of what colleges actually seek in students. With that knowledge, students can increase their potential for acceptance to their top-choice colleges by focusing on those strengths which are priorities for the college. I regularly participate in the creation of a national report, "Top Ten Things Colleges Look for in a High School Student," from which the following list was prepared:

1. A challenging high school curriculum.

Academically successful students should take at least five core courses every semester. Include AP, IB, and Honors if they can get good grades in them. Most colleges recalculate GPA based only on core subjects (English, math, science, social science, foreign language, programming).

2. Grades that represent strong effort and an upward trend.

Slightly lower grades in a rigorous program are preferred to all A's in less challenging courses.

3. Solid scores on the SAT or ACT -- consistent with high school grades.

High scores do not compensate for low grades.

4. Passionate involvement in a few activities, demonstrating leadership, initiative, impact -- and an angle.

Depth, not breadth, of experience is most important. Colleges seek "angled" students with a passion, not "well-rounded" students. Substantive commitment to a few activities is preferable to participation in several mini activities -- and more rewarding! To complement applications, students should create a detailed resume to showcase their activities.

5. Out-of-school experiences, including summer activities, work, and hobbies that reflect responsibility, dedication, and areas of interest.

Meaningful use of your free time is essential! Students should include these commitments on their resumes.

6. Special talents or experiences that will contribute to an interesting, well-rounded student body.

A student who goes the extra mile to develop a special talent in sports, research, writing, the arts, or anything else will gain an edge. Students should consider sending a college evidence of anything that makes them stand out (e.g., portfolio of their creative writing, research abstract, CD or DVD of their talent).

7. A well-written essay that provides insight into the student's personality, values, and goals.

An application essay should be thoughtful and highly personal. It should demonstrate careful and well-constructed writing. This is your students' chance to tell their stories!

8. Anecdotal letters of recommendation from teachers and the student's counselor that give evidence of his or her intellectual curiosity, special skills, and positive character traits.

An extra recommendation from a coach, supervisor, or someone who knows the student well can help only if it sheds new light on his or her talents. However, letters from family friends, even if they are well known, are rarely given much weight.

9. Demonstrated enthusiasm for attending a university, as evidenced by a campus visit, interview, and ongoing contact with the admissions office.

Early in the college-planning process, students should schedule campus visits, including an information session, tour, and interview if available. They should stay in touch with admissions representatives and attend local presentations.

10. Demonstrated intellectual curiosity through reading, school, and extracurricular pursuits, summer activities, and more.