

# Factors in the Admission Decision

Information presented in this Research to Practice Brief is based on NACAC's 2009 *State of College Admission* report, NACAC's statement of Students' Rights and Responsibilities in the College Admission Process and NACAC's ethical guidelines for colleges, the Statement of Principles of Good Practice.

## Research highlights:

- Grades in college preparatory courses, strength of curriculum, admission test scores, and overall grades are the most important factors in admission decisions. More than half of colleges and universities rated these factors as "considerably important."
- Many colleges use other factors to provide additional information about students' academic performance, interests and personal qualities. The essay or writing sample, teacher recommendation, counselor recommendation, class rank, and student's demonstrated interest were each rated as "considerably important" by about 25 percent of colleges.
- Subject test scores (AP, IB), interviews and extracurricular activities also are used by some colleges to add depth to the application review. In general, admission officers consider these factors as supplemental to the main academic factors, and as such, rated them with low to moderate importance.
- Among the lowest rated factors were SAT II scores, state graduation exam scores, portfolios, and work.
- During the 2007–08 admission cycle, 21 percent of colleges reported revoking offers of admission due to either final grades, disciplinary issues or falsification of documents.

## Implications for practice:

- Students interested in attending college should focus on the top four factors in admission decisions but also should consider the subset of factors that colleges attributed some level of importance in order to give admission officials a complete picture of their personal qualities, interests, and academic potential.
- Although general patterns indicate that students should focus the most attention on the top four factors, they also should research the admission requirements and considerations of the schools where they plan to apply for admission. Individual colleges will vary in the information they require to apply and in the emphasis they place on various factors in the decision.
- Students and their families should work closely with high school counselors and follow processes recommended by high schools to file college applications.
- After gaining admission to an institution, students should make efforts to maintain academic performance and avoid disciplinary infractions in order to avoid having admission rescinded.

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The National Association for College Admission Counseling offers this publication to assist college admission professionals in two primary ways: (1) to provide a summary of research that can help professionals understand the relative importance that colleges place on various factors in the admission decision; and (2) to offer professionals a ready-made tool to inform students and families about factors in the admission decision and about their rights and responsibilities during the application process.



# Factors in the Admission Decision

## How Colleges Rate Various Factors in the College Admission Decision

Grades in college preparatory courses, strength of curriculum, admission test scores, and grades in all courses are the most important factors in the college admission decision. More than half of all colleges rated these factors as having “considerable importance” (see Table 1). Colleges consider these factors to provide important information about a students’ academic potential in college and, as such, ranked these factors well above others in evaluating applications.

Admission officers also use other factors to learn more about students’ academic potential, non-academic talents, interests, and personal qualities. The essay or writing sample, teacher recommendation, counselor recommendation, class rank, and student’s demonstrated interest were each rated as “considerably important” by about 25 percent of colleges. These factors, along with others such as interviews and extracurricular activities, provide admission officers with a more holistic view of students.

The factors that were primarily rated as having little to no importance include SAT II scores, state graduation exams, portfolios, and work. SAT II scores are mainly used for placement at highly selective schools rather than admission.

### *Differences between colleges in how factors are rated*

With few exceptions, colleges consistently rate grades, curriculum, and admission test scores as the most important factors. However, there are some small but important variations in how different types of colleges rated factors in the admission decision. For a complete comparison of colleges by selected characteristics, see Table 2.

Private colleges are generally more “holistic” in their approach, meaning that private colleges consider a wider range of factors in the admission process when compared to public colleges. Since, on average, public colleges receive more than twice the amount of applications, a more mechanical method for evaluating applications is used. In general:

**Table 1. Percentage of colleges attributing different levels of importance to factors in the admission decision: 2008**

Factor	Considerable importance	Moderate importance	Limited importance	No importance
Grades in college prep courses	74.9%	15.7%	5.0%	4.4%
Strength of curriculum	61.5	24.9	8.6	5.0
Admission test scores (SAT, ACT)	54.3	30.6	10.7	4.5
Grades in all courses	52.1	34.4	9.6	3.9
Essay or writing sample	26.6	29.9	22.7	20.9
Teacher recommendation	21.1	38.3	29.7	11.0
Student’s demonstrated interest	20.9	28.7	27.2	23.3
Counselor recommendation	20.4	41.9	26.5	11.2
Class rank	19.2	33.1	32.2	15.4
Interview	11.0	22.4	30.4	36.1
Subject test scores (AP, IB)	7.8	27.0	32.7	32.4
Extracurricular activities	7.4	36.6	37.5	18.5
SAT II scores	6.7	8.2	24.4	60.7
Portfolio	6.7	7.9	34.7	50.8
State graduation exam scores	3.9	14.2	29.3	52.6
Work	1.8	16.9	41.3	40.1

Source: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2008

**Table 2. Percentage of colleges attributing “considerable importance” to factors in the admission decision by institutional characteristics: 2008 (continued)**

	Grades in college prep courses	Strength of curriculum	Admission test scores	Grades in all courses	Essay/ writing sample	Teacher rec.	Demonstrated interest	Counselor rec.
<b>Total</b>	<b>74.9%</b>	<b>61.5%</b>	<b>54.3%</b>	<b>52.1%</b>	<b>26.6%</b>	<b>21.1%</b>	<b>20.9%</b>	<b>20.4%</b>
<i>Control</i>								
Public	73.6	62.6	64.1	46.2	14.3	9.9	5.6	13.2
Private	75.2	61.0	50.8	54.5	31.3	25.3	26.5	23.1
<i>Enrollment</i>								
Fewer than 3,000 students	70.3	55.3	47.5	53.2	27.3	24.7	29.2	22.3
3,000 to 9,999	84.4	72.7	63.6	46.1	26.3	18.4	4.1	17.1
10,000 or more	81.0	73.8	72.1	57.1	23.3	7.1	7.1	16.3
<i>Selectivity</i>								
Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants	81.1	79.6	51.9	39.2	56.6	39.6	18.5	38.9
50 to 70 percent	80.2	69.0	56.1	56.4	17.2	13.0	18.4	18.0
71 to 85 percent	77.0	59.3	53.1	53.6	23.0	19.6	21.4	16.8
More than 85 percent	57.9	36.8	56.9	50.9	21.1	17.2	24.1	12.1

- Private colleges placed greater importance on factors other than the top four in the admission decision, including essay/writing sample, interview, counselor and teacher recommendations, work and extracurricular activities, subject test scores (AP, IB), portfolio, and demonstrated interest.
- Private colleges placed more importance on grades in all courses.
- Public colleges were more likely to consider class rank to be “considerably important,” whereas private colleges most often rated it as “moderately important.”

Smaller colleges also tend to conduct a more holistic application review, likely due to the lower number of applications they receive in comparison to large universities. In general:

- Smaller colleges attributed more importance to the interview, essay/writing sample, counselor and teacher recommendations, portfolio, state graduation exams, and demonstrated interest.
- Larger colleges attributed greater importance to admission test scores and class rank.

Highly selective colleges tend to place greater emphasis on many of the factors, when compared to less selective colleges. Selectivity is based on the percentage of applicants that a college accepts. Because applicants to the most selective colleges often have similarly high grades and test scores, these colleges seek more information with which to evaluate each applicant. In general:

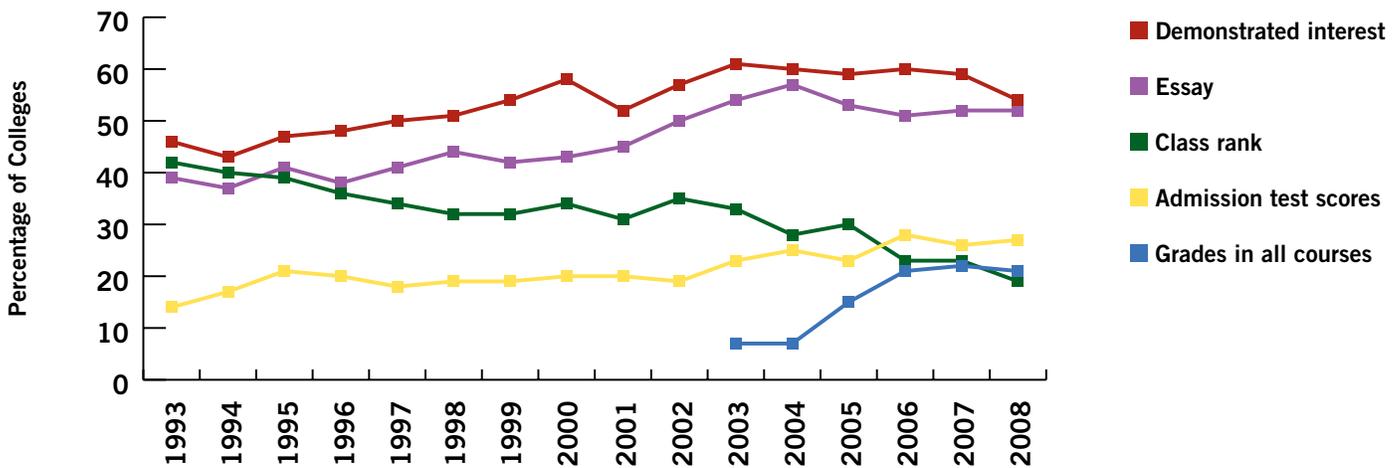
- More selective colleges placed greater importance on grades in college preparatory classes and strength of curriculum.
- Colleges that accept fewer applicants also placed more emphasis on many factors outside of the top four, including the essay/writing sample, counselor and teacher recommendations, class rank, extracurricular activities and work, and portfolios.
- More selective colleges also placed greater importance on subject test scores (AP and IB) and SAT II scores.

**Table 2 (continued). Percentage of colleges attributing “considerable importance” to factors in the admission decision by institutional characteristics: 2008**

	Class rank	Interview	Subject test scores (AP, IB)	Extracurricular activities	SAT II scores	Portfolio	State graduation exam scores	Work
<b>Total</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>11.0%</b>	<b>7.8%</b>	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>3.9%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>
<i>Control</i>								
Public	29.7	2.2	7.9	3.4	5.7	0.0	4.7	0.0
Private	15.4	14.3	7.8	8.9	7.1	9.1	3.7	2.5
<i>Enrollment</i>								
Fewer than 3,000 students	12.4	15.1	6.0	7.3	6.1	8.8	4.6	1.9
3,000 to 9,999	27.3	4.0	11.8	5.3	7.9	2.7	1.4	1.3
10,000 or more	39.5	2.4	9.8	11.9	7.5	2.5	4.9	2.4
<i>Selectivity</i>								
Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants	24.1	9.3	18.9	14.8	15.1	9.6	0.0	1.9
50 to 70 percent	16.8	11.1	6.1	7.1	4.1	5.1	6.2	1.0
71 to 85 percent	18.6	11.8	4.5	7.1	5.5	6.4	2.7	2.7
More than 85 percent	12.1	8.6	5.2	3.4	3.5	7.1	0.0	1.8

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2008.

**Figure 1. Factors showing the most change in percentage of colleges rating as “considerably important”: 1993 to 2008**



*Recent changes in how factors are rated*

In recent years, some factors have become more important than others. The importance of admission test scores (SAT, ACT) and grades in all courses have leveled off, while colleges valuing the essay/writing sample and students' demonstrated interest as "considerably important" have been on the increase. However, class rank has steadily decreased in importance, in part, because of the increasingly diverse pool of applicants and inconsistent high school grading schemes nationwide (see Figure 1).

*Other considerations in application review*

A small number of colleges (eight percent) reviewed the social networking profiles of prospective students, and about five percent took extra steps to verify that applicants' essays are authentic.

For the 2007–08 admission cycle, 21 percent of colleges revoked at least one offer of admission. Among the most common reasons for revoking an offer of admission were final grades, disciplinary issues and falsification of application information. The average number of admission offers revoked by each college was ten.

**Implications for Students and Parents**

These findings highlight important details about admission decisions for students and families to take into account as they prepare for college. Colleges consistently rate four factors as most important in admission decisions—grades in college prep courses, strength of curriculum, admission test scores, and grades in all courses. Students should focus their efforts on strengthening these areas by doing well in the most challenging courses possible.

Students also should consider the subset of factors that colleges attributed some level of importance in order to give admission officials a complete picture of their personal qualities, interests, and academic potential. The essay/writing sample, interview, teacher and counselor recommendations, and extracurricular activities can be very helpful in providing admission officials with the best information about the students' interests and personal qualities. Private, small and more selective colleges are more likely to pay greater attention to these factors. It is important for students to research the admission requirements and considerations of the schools where they plan to apply for admission.

Recently, colleges have been paying increased attention to a student's interest in attending. Because most students apply to more than one college, admission officers look for indications of how

Recently, colleges have been paying increased attention to a student's interest in attending. Because most students apply to more than one college, admission officers look for indications of how interested an applicant is in that particular college.

interested an applicant is in that particular college. In 2008, 77 percent of colleges attributed some level of importance to a student's demonstrated interest (21 percent considerable, 29 percent moderate and 27 percent limited). Effective ways a student can show interest in a college include campus visits, interviews, content of open-ended essays, contact with the admission office, letters of recommendation, and early application through either Early Action or Early Decision. However, students should be aware that the quality of contact with the admission office is usually more important than the frequency of contact. Students also should consider carefully before applying Early Decision, as this is a binding agreement to attend a particular college if accepted.

After gaining admission to an institution, students should make efforts to maintain academic performance and avoid disciplinary infractions in order to avoid having an admission offer rescinded. Students also should be aware that some colleges may view content posted on social networking sites as part of the application review, scholarship consideration or admission into a special program.

**Rights and Responsibilities of Students and Admission Offices***Student's have rights and responsibilities*

As students begin the application process, they should be aware of some basic rights and responsibilities they have in the application process:

**Rights**

- Students have the right to receive factual and comprehensive information from colleges and universities about admission requirements; financial costs; financial aid opportunities, practices and packaging policies; and housing policies. Students who are considering applying under an early admission plan have

the right to complete information from the college about its process and policies.

- Students have the right to be free from high-pressure sales tactics.

## Responsibilities

- Students have the responsibility to research, and to understand and comply with the policies and procedures of each college or university regarding application fees, financial aid, scholarships, and housing.
- Students must complete all material required for application and submit the application on or before the published deadlines. A student should be the sole author of his or her application.
- Students should seek the assistance of their high school counselors early and throughout the application period. Students should follow the process recommended by their high schools for filing college applications.
- Students have the responsibility to arrange, if appropriate, for visits to and/or interviews at colleges of interest.

## *NACAC member colleges abide by ethical principles*

To ensure that colleges are acting in the best interests of students, postsecondary NACAC members have agreed upon a common set of guidelines to regulate the admission process. Guidelines related to the review of applications include the following:

## Mandatory Practices

- State clearly the requirements for the first-year and transfer admission and enrollment processes, including secondary school preparation, standardized testing, financial aid, housing and notification deadlines, and refund procedures.
- Not use minimum test scores as the sole criterion for admission, advising or for the awarding of financial aid.
- Not require or ask candidates or the secondary schools to indicate the order of the candidates' college or university preferences, except under Early Decision.
- State the specific relationship among admission and financial aid practices and policies.
- Not establish any application deadlines for first-year candidates for fall admission prior to October 15 and give equal consideration to all applications received by that date.

## Best Practices (Recommended)

- Admit candidates on the basis of academic and personal criteria rather than financial need, except in the case of international students who are ineligible for federal aid.
- Refrain from asking students where else they have applied.
- Issue a statement of disclosure as to how demonstration of student interest is used in the application process.

## Links

### **NACAC's Resources for Students**

<http://www.nacacnet.org/StudentResources/Pages/default.aspx>

### **NACAC's Statement of Principles of Good Practice**

<http://www.nacacnet.org/ABOUTNACAC/POLICIES/Pages/default.aspx>

# NACAC Knowledge Center

Tap into the collective knowledge of NACAC's 11,000 members at NACAC's Knowledge Center—a forum for sharing tools and resources for the college admission counseling professional.



Check out NACAC's Knowledge Center online at [www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org).  
Submit materials to [KnowledgeCenter@nacacnet.org](mailto:KnowledgeCenter@nacacnet.org)