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CHAPTER 3 FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS

There is no definite plan or specific combination of factors that will guarantee a student admission to his or her preferred institution. Colleges and universities review many aspects of prospective student applications in order to determine which students will be admitted. In addition to considering the merits of each applicant, most universities also consider the composition of the entering freshmen and transfer classes as a whole in order to ensure that a diverse group of students with a variety of academic and extracurricular interests will enrich the campus experience. The importance of various factors in the admission decision also differ depending on a student's designation as a first-time freshman, transfer, or international student. While first-time freshmen and international students had similarities in regard to top admission factors, top factors for transfer students were considerably different. Institutional characteristics, such

as enrollment size and acceptance rate, also impact the importance of admission factors.

Factors in the Admission Decision: First-Time Freshmen, 2016 (see Table 7)

- Grades in high school have been among the top decision factors for first-time freshmen for decades. Total GPA and grades in college prep courses were each rated as considerably important by 77 percent colleges. Admission test scores and strength of curriculum were also rated considerably important by more than half of colleges (54 percent and 52 percent, respectively).
- A second set of factors were most often considered to be moderately important. These factors tend to provide insight regarding personal qualities and interest of students, as well as more detail on academic performance. They include essays or writing samples; teacher and counselor

recommendations; student's demonstrated interest; class rank; and extracurricular activities.

- A final group of admission decision factors were given moderate or considerable importance by a small percentage of institutions, on average, likely because they are relevant only to a small subset of colleges. These factors included subject test scores (AP, IB), portfolios, SAT II scores, interviews, state graduation exam scores, and work experience.

Factors in the Admission Decision: International Students, 2016 (see Table 8)

- The top factors in admission decisions for first-time international students applying to four-year US colleges were similar to those of first-time domestic students, with the important exception of English proficiency exam scores. Eighty percent of colleges rated these proficiency

TABLE 7. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2016

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in College Prep Courses	216	76.9%	12.5%	9.3%	1.4%
Grades in All Courses	218	77.1	13.8	6.4	2.8
Strength of Curriculum	218	51.8	35.3	7.3	5.5
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	219	54.3	27.9	13.7	4.1
Essay or Writing Sample	217	18.9	35.9	22.1	23.0
Counselor Recommendation	213	14.6	46.0	25.8	13.6
Student's Demonstrated Interest	212	13.7	25.5	32.1	28.8
Teacher Recommendation	211	10.9	46.4	28.0	14.7
Class Rank	217	9.2	24.0	34.6	32.3
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	216	6.9	30.6	30.6	31.9
Portfolio	210	6.2	5.7	27.6	60.5
Extracurricular Activities	214	7.9	36.0	36.9	19.2
SAT II Scores	212	2.4	6.1	21.2	70.3
Interview	213	4.7	17.4	31.9	46.0
State Graduation Exam Scores	210	1.9	7.6	21.9	68.6
Work	211	2.8	15.6	47.4	34.1

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2016

scores as considerably important, followed by grades in college prep courses and grades in all courses (66 percent each), and strength of curriculum (47 percent).

- The moderately important decision factors also were similar to those for domestic students, with a few exceptions worth noting. Nineteen percent of colleges rated the essay/writing sample as considerably important for domestic students, compared to 23 percent for international students. For international students, the essay can serve as another indicator of English proficiency in addition to offering information about student experiences and academic interests.
- A national certificate signifying graduation or school attendance was also an important factor for international students, rated as considerably important by 28 percent of institutions and as moderately important by an additional 24 percent.

Factors in the Admission Decision: Transfer Students, 2016 (see Table 9)

- The factors considered in transfer admission decisions are notably different than those for first-time domestic and international students. The only two factors that are rated as considerably important by a majority of colleges were overall GPA at prior postsecondary institutions (81 percent) and average grades in transferable courses (75 percent).

TABLE 8. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN), FALL 2016

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
English Proficiency Exam Scores	193	80.3%	16.1%	1.0%	2.6%
Grades in College Prep Courses	195	66.2	20.5	9.2	4.1
Grades in All Courses	196	66.3	21.4	9.7	2.6
Strength of Curriculum	196	46.9	33.2	10.7	9.2
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	197	36.5	27.9	24.4	11.2
Essay or Writing Sample	197	23.4	32.5	21.8	22.3
National School Leaving or Graduation Certificate	180	28.3	24.4	21.1	21.1
Counselor Recommendation	191	13.6	41.9	24.1	26.1
Teacher Recommendation	189	10.6	43.9	27.0	18.5
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	196	6.6	31.1	25.0	37.2
Student's Demonstrated Interest	191	14.1	25.7	31.4	28.8
Class Rank	196	6.1	16.8	31.6	45.4
Interview	191	8.4	16.2	29.8	45.5
Portfolio	192	5.7	6.3	26.0	62.0
Extracurricular Activities	194	6.2	30.4	39.7	23.7
SAT II Scores	193	2.6	6.7	20.2	70.5
Work	191	2.1	11.5	46.1	40.3

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2016

Unlike other prospective student populations, these factors serve as direct evidence of a student's ability to succeed in college-level academic coursework.

- For transfer students, many factors related to high school performance fall to the level of moderate to limited importance, including grades, strength of the high school curriculum, and recommendations from teachers and counselors.
- In contrast to first-time prospective students, 77 percent of colleges rated admission test scores (SAT, ACT) as having limited or no importance in transfer admission decisions.

Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen: Change Over Time

Because NACAC only recently began to collect annual data regarding transfer and international students, change in admission

factor importance over time is limited to first-time freshmen. Academic performance in college prep courses has been consistently rated as the top factor in admission decisions, with between 75 and 87 percent of colleges rating it as considerably important. In fact, ratings of many admission decision factors have remained remarkably stable. Notable exceptions include declining importance of class rank and interviews (see Table 10).

TABLE 9. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: TRANSFER STUDENTS, FALL 2016

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Overall GPA at Prior Postsecondary	198	80.8	10.1	6.6	2.5
Average Grades in Transferable Courses	198	75.3	16.2	5.1	3.5
High School Grade Point Average	201	14.4	25.4	44.3	15.9
Strength of High School Curriculum	200	10.5	24.0	37.5	28.0
Essay or Writing Sample	199	15.1	27.1	27.6	30.2
Articulation with Prior Postsecondary Institution	197	17.3	29.9	23.9	28.9
Grades in College Prep Courses in high school	197	14.7	27.4	37.1	20.8
Teacher Recommendation	194	8.2	35.6	30.9	25.3
Student's Demonstrated Interest	195	12.8	20.5	33.3	33.3
Quality of Postsecondary Institution	196	10.2	30.6	38.8	20.4
Counselor Recommendation	196	6.6	26.0	34.2	33.2
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	200	7.5	16.0	44.0	32.5
Extracurricular Activities	197	5.1	19.8	46.2	28.9
Portfolio	193	6.7	4.7	25.4	63.2
Interview	195	3.6	14.9	28.7	52.8
State Graduation Exam Scores	194	—	1.5	18.0	80.4
Work	196	2.6	13.8	49.5	34.2
High School Class rank	199	1.0	8.5	19.6	70.9
SAT II scores	195	—	3.1	15.9	81.0
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	199	2.5	15.6	27.1	54.8

—No institutions in category.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2016.

TABLE 10. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING “CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE” TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2006 TO FALL 2016

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Grades in College Prep Courses	76%	80%	75%	87%	83%	84%	82%	82%	79%	—	77%
Strength of Curriculum	62	64	62	71	66	68	65	64	60	—	52
Admission Test Scores	60	59	54	58	59	59	56	58	56	—	54
Grades in All Courses	51	52	52	46	46	52	50	52	60	—	77
Essay or Writing Sample	28	26	27	26	27	25	20	22	22	—	19
Class Rank	23	23	19	16	22	19	13	15	14	—	9
Counselor Recommendation	21	21	20	17	19	19	16	16	17	—	15
Demonstrated Interest	21	22	21	21	23	21	18	20	17	—	14
Teacher Recommendation	20	21	21	17	19	17	15	14	15	—	11
Interview	10	11	11	7	9	6	7	8	4	—	5
Extracurricular Activities	8	7	7	9	7	5	7	10	6	—	8
Work	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	1	—	3
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	8	7	8	7	10	7	5	8	7	—	7
State Graduation Exams	6	4	4	3	4	4	2	3	4	—	2
SAT II Scores	5	6	7	5	5	5	4	6	5	—	2
Portfolio	—	—	7	8	6	7	5	6	7	—	6

—Data are not available.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Surveys, 2006 through 2016.

TABLE 11. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INFLUENCE TO STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FALL 2016

	N	Considerable Influence	Moderate Influence	Limited Influence	No Influence
<i>FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN</i>					
High School Attended	208	1.9	17.3	42.8	38.0
Race/Ethnicity	210	3.8	14.8	17.1	64.3
State or County of Residence	210	.5	10.0	27.1	62.4
First-generation Status	211	3.3	16.6	28.9	51.2
Ability to Pay	209	2.4	1.9	16.3	79.4
Gender	209	1.9	8.1	12.4	77.5
Alumni Relations	211	.5	8.5	38.9	52.1
<i>TRANSFER STUDENTS</i>					
High School Attended	196	—	4.6	34.2	61.2
Race/Ethnicity	197	3.6	11.2	17.8	67.5
State or County of Residence	197	.5	6.6	22.3	70.6
First-generation Status	196	3.6	11.2	24.5	60.7
Ability to Pay	197	2.5	2.5	13.2	81.7
Gender	197	2.0	6.6	8.1	83.2
Alumni Relations	197	.5	7.6	38.1	53.8
<i>INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN)</i>					
High School Attended	192	3.6	12.5	37.5	46.4
Race/Ethnicity	194	2.1	7.7	14.9	75.3
State or County of Residence	195	3.1	11.8	23.1	62.1
First-generation Status	193	3.1	10.9	20.7	65.3
Ability to Pay	194	21.1	18.6	9.8	50.5
Gender	193	2.1	6.7	8.3	82.9
Alumni Relations	194	.5	6.7	39.7	53.1

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2016.

In analyzing this data, however, it is important to focus on the long-term trends for each factor rather than any year-to-year changes, as such differences may be due to variations in the annual survey samples.

Factors in Admission by Institutional Characteristics: First-Time Freshmen, 2016

This section highlights differences in the level of importance attributed to admission factors based on institutional characteristics. The results presented below are limited to admission factors for prospective first-time freshmen. Lack of variation for transfer and international admission factor ratings prohibited analysis for these groups.

The top four admission decision factors for first-time freshmen are consistent across all types of institutions. However, institutional characteristics determined the relative level of importance assigned to some admission factors.

- Private colleges placed relatively more importance on grades in college prep courses, strength of curriculum, and the essay/writing sample. Public schools gave slightly more weight to admission test scores.
- Smaller institutions attributed more importance to the essay/writing sample than their larger counterparts.
- Strength of curriculum and the essay/writing sample were valued more highly by institutions with lower acceptance rates.

(See Appendix Table B.4. for a correlation matrix of statistically significant associations.)

Student Characteristics as Contextual Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen, Transfer, and International Students, 2016

Colleges were asked to rate the influence of certain student characteristics—race/ethnicity, first-generation status, high school attended, state or county of residence, gender, alumni relations, and ability to pay—in terms of how they affect evaluation of the main admission factors. Although, for the most part, college admission officers give very little importance to these characteristics, there are some findings worth noting (see Table 11). For example, 19 percent of colleges rated the high school attended as either moderately or considerably important in first-time freshmen admission decisions. In both freshmen and transfer admission decisions, a similar proportion of colleges attributed at least limited importance to alumni relations (48 percent and 46 percent, respectively).

Interesting differences also were found in the relative importance given to these factors based on institution type. Data provided on the 2016 NACAC Admission Trends Survey allowed for comparison by institutional characteristics for each prospective student group—first-time freshmen, transfer students, and international students.

Institutional Control

- Private colleges gave more weight to high school attended, first-generation status, gender, and alumni relations when evaluating the applications of each student group.
- Private colleges gave greater consideration to race/ethnicity and ability to pay when evaluating first-time freshmen and transfer students.

Enrollment

- For all three prospective student groups, smaller institutions gave more weight to ability to pay.

Selectivity

- When evaluating applications from each student group, institutions that were more selective placed more emphasis on first-generation status and gender.
- For both first-time freshmen and transfer students, institutions with lower acceptance rates were more likely to consider race/ethnicity in evaluating applications. For first-time freshmen, institutions were more likely to consider high school attended.
- For international students, selective institutions gave more weight to alumni relations.

(See Appendix Tables B.5. – B.7. for complete correlation matrices of statistically significant associations.)