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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 have similarities in

regard to top admission factors, top factors for transfer students are considerably different. Institutional characteristics, such as enrollment size and acceptance rate, also impact the importance of admission factors.¹

Factors in the Admission Decision: First-Time Freshmen, Fall 2014

- The top admission decision factors for first-time freshmen have been consistent for decades. The No. 1 factor—rated as considerably important by 79 percent of colleges—was grades in college prep courses, followed by strength of curriculum and grades in all courses (each 60 percent), and admission test scores (53 percent).

- A second set of factors were most often considered to be moderately important. These factors tend to provide insight regarding personal qualities and student interests, as well as more detail on academic performance. They included 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, 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 exams scores, and work experience (see Table 7).

¹ While the data in this chapter related to transfer students were drawn from the 2015 ATS, some information concerning domestic and international first-time freshmen is from the 2014 administration of the survey. As ambiguity in the wording of some new 2015 survey questions significantly affected the results concerning admission factors for first-time freshmen, the 2014 figures were reported instead.

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

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in College Prep Courses	231	79.2%	13.0%	6.9%	0.9%
Grades in All Courses	229	60.3	31.0	8.7	—
Strength of Curriculum	231	60.2	26.8	10.0	3.0
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	228	55.7	32.5	7.9	3.9
Essay or Writing Sample	231	22.1	39.0	21.6	17.3
Counselor Recommendation	231	17.3	42.4	27.3	13.0
Student's Demonstrated Interest	231	16.9	33.3	26.8	22.9
Teacher Recommendation	230	15.2	43.5	27.8	13.5
Class Rank	228	14.0	37.7	32.0	16.2
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	227	7.0	35.2	32.6	25.1
Portfolio	229	6.6	10.0	30.6	52.8
Extracurricular Activities	231	5.6	43.3	34.6	16.5
SAT II Scores	226	5.3	8.4	23.0	63.3
Interview	229	3.5	23.1	28.4	45.0
State Graduation Exam Scores	228	3.5	11.0	25.4	60.1
Work	230	0.9	21.3	44.8	33.0

— = No institutions in category.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2014.

Factors in the Admission Decision: International Students, Fall 2014

- 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-five percent of colleges rated these proficiency

scores as considerably important, followed by grades in college prep courses (77 percent), grades in all courses (64 percent), and strength of curriculum (57 percent).

- The moderately important decision factors also were similar to those for domestic students, with a few exceptions worth noting. Twenty-two percent of colleges rated the essay/writing sample as considerably

important for domestic students, compared to 37 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 (see Table 8).

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

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
English Proficiency Exam Scores	184	84.8%	14.1%	1.1%	—
Grades in College Prep Courses	183	77.0	16.4	4.9	1.6
Grades in All Courses	184	64.1	30.4	3.8	1.6
Strength of Curriculum	183	56.8	28.4	9.8	4.9
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	183	41.0	31.7	18.6	8.7
Essay or Writing Sample	183	37.2	31.1	18.0	13.7
National School Leaving or Graduation Certificate	180	25.6	30.0	23.3	21.1
Counselor Recommendation	182	19.8	34.6	27.5	18.1
Teacher Recommendation	183	19.1	31.1	30.1	19.7
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	181	14.4	27.1	34.3	24.3
Student's Demonstrated Interest	182	13.7	25.8	30.2	30.2
Class Rank	181	7.7	22.7	34.8	34.8
Interview	183	7.7	19.7	30.1	42.6
Portfolio	183	6.6	7.7	25.7	60.1
Extracurricular Activities	180	5.0	26.1	39.4	29.4
SAT II Scores	182	3.8	5.5	28.0	62.6
Work	183	2.2	10.9	33.9	53.0

— = No institutions in category.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2014.

Factors in the Admission Decision: Transfer Students, Fall 2015

- The factors considered in transfer admission decisions were notably different than those for first-time domestic and international students. The only two factors that were rated as considerably important by a majority of colleges were overall GPA at prior postsecondary institution(s) (83 percent) and average grades in transferable courses (71 percent).

Unlike other prospective student populations, these factors can 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, 72 percent of colleges rated admission test scores (SAT, ACT) as having limited or no importance in transfer admission decisions (see Table 9).

Factors in the Admission Decision for First-time Freshmen: Change Over Time

Because NACAC only recently began to collect annual data from transfer and international students,

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

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Overall GPA at Prior Postsecondary	296	83.4	11.1	3.7	1.7
Average Grades in Transferable Courses	296	70.9	20.6	6.4	2.0
High School Grade Point Average	298	22.8	27.5	35.2	14.4
Strength of High School Curriculum	191	20.4	37.7	—	41.9
Essay or Writing Sample	298	19.8	28.9	21.8	29.5
Articulation with Prior Postsecondary Institution	290	19.3	24.1	27.2	29.3
Grades in College Prep Courses in High School	295	18.0	23.7	35.9	22.4
Teacher Recommendation	294	16.0	28.6	26.9	28.6
Student's Demonstrated Interest	293	14.7	18.1	28.0	39.2
Quality of Postsecondary Institution	291	14.1	32.6	28.5	24.7
Counselor Recommendation	293	12.6	25.9	25.3	36.2
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	295	6.1	22.0	41.0	30.8
Extracurricular Activities	294	5.4	25.9	41.8	26.9
Portfolio	288	5.2	7.3	19.4	68.1
Interview	293	4.1	15.4	29.4	51.2
State Graduation Exam Scores	289	2.1	2.8	18.7	76.5
Work	291	1.4	17.9	41.2	39.5
High School Class Rank	294	1.0	10.5	31.3	57.1
SAT II scores	295	0.7	3.4	14.2	81.7
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	296	0.3	11.1	36.1	52.4

— = No institutions in category.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2015.

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 about 80 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).

In analyzing these 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, Fall 2014

This section highlights differences in the level of importance attributed to admission factors based on institutional characteristics. The results presented below are limited to

TABLE 10: PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING “CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE” TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2006 TO FALL 2014

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

— = Data are not available.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Surveys, 2006 through 2014.

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 were 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 the essay/writing samples. Public schools gave slightly more weight to admission test scores.
- Larger institutions attributed more importance to strength of curriculum than their smaller counterparts.
- Grades in college prep courses and strength of the high school curriculum were valued more highly by institutions with lower yield rates in comparison with their higher yield counterparts.

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

Student Characteristics as Contextual Factors, Fall 2015

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, 22 percent of colleges rated the high school

attended as at least moderately important in first-time freshmen admission decisions. Approximately half of colleges gave at least limited weight to first-generation status when evaluating both first-time domestic students and international students (48 percent and 51 percent, respectively).

In both freshmen and transfer admission decisions, a similar proportion of colleges attributed at least limited importance to alumni relations (51 percent and 49 percent, respectively).

Interesting differences also were found in the relative

importance given to these factors based on institution type. Data provided on the 2015 NACAC Admission Trends Survey allowed for comparison by institutional characteristics for each prospective student group—first-time freshmen, transfer students, and international students.

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

	N	Considerable Influence	Moderate Influence	Limited Influence	No Influence
<i>FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN</i>					
High School Attended	297	2.0%	20.2%	34.3%	43.4%
Race/Ethnicity	298	3.4	11.1	18.5	67.1
State or County of Residence	297	2.0	7.4	22.9	67.7
First-generation Status	296	2.4	13.9	31.8	52.0
Ability to Pay	296	0.7	4.7	12.5	52.1
Gender	296	2.0	2.4	12.8	82.8
Alumni Relations	296	1.0	8.1	41.6	49.3
<i>TRANSFER STUDENTS</i>					
High School Attended	292	1.4	5.1	25.7	67.8
Race/Ethnicity	294	2.7	9.2	16.7	71.4
State or County of Residence	293	1.7	5.5	18.8	74.1
First-generation Status	290	1.7	11.4	27.2	59.7
Ability to Pay	293	1.0	7.5	40.3	51.2
Gender	293	1.4	2.4	10.6	85.7
Alumni Relations	293	1.0	5.5	11.3	82.3
<i>INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN)</i>					
High School Attended	276	3.6	17.4	30.4	48.6
Race/Ethnicity	278	2.5	7.2	14.4	75.9
State or County of Residence	278	2.2	10.1	23.7	64.0
First-generation Status	276	1.8	9.1	22.1	67.0
Ability to Pay	284	20.6	10.3	8.9	60.1
Gender	278	1.8	2.9	12.2	83.1
Alumni Relations	275	1.5	8.0	41.1	49.5

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2015.

Institutional Control

- Private institutions gave more weight to ability to pay, gender, and alumni relations when evaluating the applications of each student group.
- Private colleges were slightly more likely to give greater consideration to race/ethnicity when evaluating first-time freshmen.

Enrollment

- For all three prospective student groups, smaller institutions gave more weight to ability to pay and alumni relations.
- For both first-time freshmen and transfer students, larger institutions placed more emphasis on state or county of residence.

Selectivity

- When evaluating applications from each student group, institutions that were more selective placed greater emphasis on five of the seven student contextual factors—race/ethnicity, state or county of residence, first-generation status, gender, and alumni relations.

Yield

- Ability to pay and alumni relations were given more weight at lower-yield institutions for each of the student groups—first-time freshmen, transfer, and international.

Highlights by Student Group

- Nearly one-third (31 percent) of Admission Trends Survey respondents rated ability to pay as having considerable or moderate influence in admission decisions for prospective first-time international students, compared to only 14.5 percent for first-time domestic students and 12 percent for transfer students.
- For both domestic and international first-time students, 22 percent and 21 percent of responding colleges, respectively, placed at least moderate influence on the high school attended as a contextual factor in admission decisions. High school attended was rated as moderately or considerably important for transfer students by only 6.5 percent of colleges.

- Eighty-three percent of survey respondents considered alumni relations to have no influence in transfer admission decisions, compared to only half for first-time freshmen (domestic and international).

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