

What Admissions Officers Look For

What are the biggest factors in making a great impression?

By SAGE Scholars

Ask any admissions officer what 3 elements are the most important in the admissions process and the answer will likely be courses, courses, and courses. Their job is to bring to campus those students the faculty most want to teach. Although it doesn't always hold true, the consensus is that the best measure of a student's potential in college is their performance in high school.

The transcript

Most students think their transcripts are not a true reflection of their abilities. That's not what admissions officers think. Most admissions officers read the transcript as a dynamic, multi-dimensional document that speaks to your level of motivation. Have you taken advantage of the most challenging parts of the available curriculum? Have you demonstrated range, depth, and breadth in the courses you've taken and willingness to try new things? Most importantly, is there a trend? Are you maturing and gaining strength in the upper grades—or taking it easy? The transcript is like a relief map of your high school experience.

Test scores

Test scores may cause the most anxiety for college applicants. More than a million students take the SAT or ACT every year. What do admissions officers look for in reading your test scores? For the most part, test scores are just 1 element of consideration—often to raise questions or confirm the obvious.

When a student has high test scores but mediocre grades, it raises questions about motivation. Is the student bright but lazy? If so, the admissions office must be satisfied that there isn't an inherent poor work ethic.

Conversely, the student with very high grades and low test scores raises questions. How does this school compare to other high schools? Is there grade inflation at the school? How demanding was the course load? Your test scores are part of interpreting your transcript.

The personal essay

The personal essay allows each applicant a terrific opportunity to help admissions officers read the map more accurately. In addition to articulating your goals, dreams, and expectations, you can also explain any gaps or changes in your record. The essay is your chance to take some control in the admissions process and make your own case.

Admissions officers certainly look for writing ability. But they also look for originality and logic. They want to gain a fuller sense of your abilities and aspirations. The most effective essays convey an authentic voice, something that admissions officers recognize and appreciate. The authentic voice doesn't come from trying to satisfy the reader, counselors, or parents. It comes through when the writer conveys a true essence of personality and give the reader a deeper understanding of their individual strengths.

Extracurricular activities

Most applications ask you to list your accomplishments and extracurricular activities. Some students obsess about these and join lots of activities, especially in their senior year. Trying to improve the look of your application this way screams of superficiality!

Colleges are more interested in a sustained involvement borne from your true interests. A person with a singular interest, pursued with passion, is far more appealing than someone who touches lightly on many activities.

Recommendations

For recommendations, colleges want to hear from a few people who know you well and can write convincingly about your abilities, not a long list of important people with whom you've had limited interaction. A compelling recommendation may come from a teacher who gave you a B but speaks of your determination and tenacity in pursuing a subject that does not come easily to you.

A final point

Most institutions are looking for a reason to admit you, not keep you out. View the application, transcript, recommendations, and personal essay as instruments over which you have control. Use them to build a clear and convincing argument.

