

HOW ADMISSIONS DECISIONS ARE MADE

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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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**2015 Harvard Summer Institute
on College Admissions**

How Admissions Decisions Are Made

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During the evaluation process, readers and admissions counselors will consider a broad range of criteria as part of the individualized review of every application.

Academic Achievement, Quality and Potential

Direct Measures

- Cumulative GPA
- Pattern of grade improvement during high school
- Quality of curriculum
 - Solid college-prep curriculum (4 years in each subject)
 - Strength of senior year courses
 - Core (req) curriculum/courses beyond core curriculum
 - AP, IB and honors courses/College Courses while in H.S.
- Test Scores (SAT I and II, ACT, AP, etc.)
- Internships in area of academic interest
- Participation in enrichment or outreach programs
- Class rank

Academic Achievement, Quality and Potential (contd)

Educational Environment

- Strength of curriculum (inc. availability of AP, IB, honors)
- Average SAT I and/or ACT scores
- Percentage attending 4-year colleges
- Competitive grading system in high school
- Competitiveness of class
- Academically disadvantaged school

Evaluative Measures

- Academic recognition and awards
- Artistic talent
- Depth in one or more academic areas related to student interests
- Evidence of academic passion
- Grasp of world events
- Independent academic research
- Intellectual curiosity
- Writing quality - content, style, originality, risk taking

Characteristics and Attributes

Personal Background

- Alumni connection
- Cultural awareness/experiences
- First generation to go to college from family
- Low-economic family background
- Underrepresented minority (for reporting purposes only)
- Personal disadvantage
- Professional diversity
- Faculty/staff connection
- Military veteran/Peace Corps, America Corps, etc.

Geographic Considerations

- In-State resident
- Economically disadvantaged region
- From school with few or no previous applicants

Characteristics and Attributes (contd)

Extracurricular activities, service, and leadership

- Awards and honors (athletic, artistic, musical, civic)
- Quality and depth of involvement
- Leadership
- Community service
- Impact student's involvement had on school and/or community
- Scholarship athlete
- Work experience

Extenuating circumstances

- Overcoming personal adversity / unusual hardships
- Language spoken at home / ESL
- Frequent moves / many different schools

Other considerations

- Demonstrated interest in college / good match
- Strong personal statement

Recommendations

Counselor & Teacher Recommendations

- Character
- Civic and cultural awareness / Diverse perspective / Tolerance
- Commitment
- Intellectual independence / Enthusiasm for learning / Risk taking
- Creativity / Artistic talent
- Concern for others / Community
- Motivation / Determination / Grit / Effort / Initiative / Persistence / Tenacity
- Leadership potential / Maturity / Responsibility

Examining the Applicant's File: Some Reading Tips

An Admissions Committee carefully reviews information provided by the student and the high school. To help you read your files, here are a few questions on each section of the application. Please carefully read the admissions cases and take notes on the candidate rating form.

Personal Information

Is there anything about the student's background or family information that stands out in relation to the college to which they are applying? Are there any special circumstances of which you should be aware when evaluating the more objective parts of the application?

Transcript

What kind of grades had the student received over the years? Is there a trend – an upward or downward one? Has the student taken advanced and/or challenging classes? (Look at the high school profiles to get a brief sketch of what is offered. Does the high school have strict prerequisites for entrance into these courses?) If shown on the transcript, what kind of program does the student plan to take in the senior year – is it challenging or weak? What are the student's curricular interests? If available, where does the student rank? (Does the high school provide rank?)

SAT I/ACT/SAT II

What are the student's SAT or ACT scores? Are there areas that are significantly higher or lower? How strong are the SAT II scores? Do they show special proficiencies in specific subject areas? How do the scores fit the score ranges on the college profiles? (How important do you think that test scores will be in the evaluation process?) Do the SAT/ACT scores correlate with the student's GPA? Is one significantly higher than the other?

ACTIVITIES

What has the student done outside the classroom, both in school and out of school? How much time has the student committed to those activities? How much depth is presented? Has the student pursued an activity over a sustained period? Has the student pursued leadership roles within those activities?

Essay

Does the essay tell you something about the student beyond the transcript? What did you learn? What qualities or talents does the student reveal? Do you hear the student's voice? Do you get a sense of the student as a person? Have they done an effective job of telling their story? Are the grammar, spelling, and punctuation correct?

Letters of Recommendation

What two or three things have you learned about the applicant through the recommendation? What struck the teacher most about the student? How positive or enthusiastic is the recommendation? Is there information that will help the admission committee determine how capable the student is of meeting the academic demands of the college?

High School/College Profiles

What can the admissions committee learn from the high school profile that might assist them? How might the colleges help us learn which student might be the best fit for their college? Does the high school profile give you information that might better help you understand the student's educational opportunities and accomplishments? (How does the school profile present its own academic program?)

College Essay Writing Tips

- Be honest – write about something small in scale; a story only you can tell in your own words.
- Let your voice be heard.
- If there is something strange about your record, you should explain it (e.g., academic trends primarily).
- You should write about something that's important to you.
- Don't try to guess about which topic we want to read.
- Content, style, originality – cautiously humorous, risk taking.
- Discuss unique talents.
- How would you describe the strength and weaknesses of the topic – your point of view – regarding the essay question?
- Interesting or unique insights about a particular topic are welcome.
- Something that will enlighten us about yourself as it relates to the chosen topic.
- Use language with which you are familiar.
- Don't try to borrow someone else's phrases.
- The essay should show your character and personality – not just bragging about your list of accomplishments.
- Answer the question when you choose a topic – follow the directions, length, and format.
- Most readers look for essays that are persuasive and somewhat argumentative.

Freshman Application Rating Sheet

APPENDIX A

Secondary School Academic Performance	Comments:	Overall:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cumulative GPA Pattern of grade improvement in high school 2. Quality of curriculum: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Solid college-prep curr. (4 yrs. in each subject) b. Strength of senior year courses c. Core (required) courses beyond core curriculum d. AP, IB and honors/college courses while in HS 3. Test scores (ACT, SAT, TOEFL, MELAB, IELTS etc.) (NOTE: Pre-printed scores are "best composite" received. Review applicant profile and/or high school transcript for additional test scores). 4. Academic interest(s) 5. Class Rank 6. Other 		
Educational Environment	Comments:	Overall:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strength of curriculum (incl. Availability of AP, IB honors) 2. Average SAT and/or ACT scores 3. Percentage attending 4-year colleges 4. Competitive grading system in high school 5. Competitiveness of class 6. Academically disadvantaged school 7. Other 		
Counselor and Teacher Recommendations	Comments:	Overall:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Character 2. Civic and cultural awareness/diverse perspective/tolerance 3. Commitment to high ideals 4. Intellectual independence/enthusiasm for learning/risk taking 5. Creativity/artistic talent 6. Concern for others/community 7. Motivation/determination/effort/initiative/persistence tenacity 8. Leadership potential/maturity/responsibility 9. Other 		
Personal Background	Comments:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural awareness/experiences 2. Socioeconomic and educational background <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. First generation to go to college in family b. Low economic family background c. Economically disadvantaged region 3. Geographical considerations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. In-State resident b. Under-represented geographic area 4. Awards/honors (academic, athletic, artistic, musical, civic) 5. Extracurricular activities, service, and leadership 6. Participation in enrichment or outreach programs 7. Alumni relationships 8. Scholarship athlete 9. Work experience 10. Other (e.g. military, Peace Corp service: specify) 		
Evaluative Measures	Comments:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Depth in one or more academic areas of student's interests 2. Evidence of academic passion 3. Grasp of world events 4. Independent academic research 5. Intellectual curiosity 6. Artistic talent 7. Writing quality: content, style, originality, risk taking 8. Other 		

Freshman Application Rating Sheet

APPENDIX A

Extenuating Circumstances	Comments:
1. Overcoming personal adversity/disadvantage/unusual hardships 2. Language spoken at home/ESL 3. Frequent moves, many different schools 4. Other	Native:
Other Considerations	Comments:
1. Demonstrated interest in school or college/good match 2. Strong personal statement 3. Other	
Overall Comments/Recommendations/Reservations:	
EVALUATOR (circle) #1 or #2 : Initials _____ Date: ____/____/20____ Data Entry: Initials/Date _____ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div> <u>OUTSTANDING</u> (Circle) HA+ HA HA - </div> <div> <u>EXCELLENT</u> A+ A A- </div> <div> <u>GOOD</u> AR+ AR AR- </div> <div> <u>AVERAGE/FAIR</u> DR+ DR DR- </div> <div> <u>BELOW AVG/POOR</u> D+ D D- </div> </div> Recommendations: CSP _____ AEE _____ Routing Flag: _____	
EVALUATOR #3 or VALIDATOR: Initials _____ Date: ____/____/20____ Data Entry: Initials/Date _____ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div> <u>OUTSTANDING</u> (Circle) HA+ HA HA - </div> <div> <u>EXCELLENT</u> A+ A A- </div> <div> <u>GOOD</u> AR+ AR AR- </div> <div> <u>AVERAGE/FAIR</u> DR+ DR DR- </div> <div> <u>BELOW AVG/POOR</u> D+ D D- </div> </div> Final Recommendations: CSP _____ AEE _____ Routing Flag: _____ REFER TO COMMITTEE: LSA _____ ENG _____ ARC _____	
FINAL COMMITTEE: Initials _____ Date: ____/____/20____ Data Entry: Initials/Date _____ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div> <u>OUTSTANDING</u> (Circle) HA+ HA HA - </div> <div> <u>EXCELLENT</u> A+ A A- </div> <div> <u>GOOD</u> AR+ AR AR- </div> <div> <u>AVERAGE/FAIR</u> DR+ DR DR- </div> <div> <u>BELOW AVG/POOR</u> D+ D D- </div> </div> Recommendations: CSP _____ AEE _____ Routing Flag: _____	

Rating scale: Outstanding – Excellent – Good – Average/Fair – Below Average/Poor

For most categories, the applicant may receive one of the above evaluation ratings. In some instances, the applicant's record will be assessed on the evidence of certain characteristics and attributes and the rating scale will not be applicable (e.g. personal background, geographical considerations). For these areas, the reviewer should assess the applicant's contributions to the University in qualifying terms. The reviewer will need to provide comments that support the recommended buckets.

2009-10



How Admission Decisions Are Made

THE GOOD NEWS: Admission decisions aren't made by tossing applications down the stairwell and accepting those students whose folders reach the bottom step. The process is fair and thorough, and admission professionals take this part of their job very seriously.

THE BAD NEWS: So many factors go into these decisions that the results can sometimes seem unpredictable and maybe even off-the-mark.

How are decisions made? Who makes them? What counts and what doesn't? What parents really want to know is, "What looks good on a college application?" The subtext here is, "How can my child get into not just any college, but those popular and picky places where all the applicants seem to be National Merit finalists? What will give my kid a competitive edge?"

First, all application materials are collected in a folder. Every scrap of paper which bears your child's name—from supplemental essays to phone message slips and thank you notes—is likely to end up there. Then, each folder is read carefully. (WARNING: Incomplete folders stay on the shelf.)

At small schools, the entire admission staff may evaluate each applicant (and at great length); at larger ones, a single official may be the sole judge (and some prescreening might be done by a computer). At many places, decisions are made by more than one person, including admission officials and often faculty representatives and other administrators. The committee where your child lands may be determined alphabetically, geographically, departmentally (e.g., school of business applicants), or by the date an application is completed. The individual who interviewed your child, visited your local high school, or spoke so reassuringly to you on the phone may—or may not—be Peterson's among the arbiters. Typically, committee members examine each folder independently (and commonly assign it an overall rating) before the committee meets to make decisions.

Transcripts

In evaluating each candidate, the high school transcript is almost always the most important component. (Exception: specialized schools in areas like art, music, and drama look more carefully at portfolios or audition tapes.) Included in nearly every candidate's application folder is a school profile which details the curriculum available at that high school, explains the grading system, and sometimes even lists median grades for each class. Admission officers are skilled at understanding the discrepancies among schools and the ways that grades are awarded, recorded, etc. They know, for example, that at some schools, only those who walk on water will earn "A"s, while at others, anyone who hands in the homework is an honors student. They read between the lines of transcripts and school profiles to ascertain a school's strength. (e.g., What percentage of graduates go on to four year colleges and where? What advanced classes are offered?) They recognize that good students at challenging, competitive high schools (public or private) may have lower grades and class ranks than their counterparts at easier ones (and that some students may not be ranked—or even graded—at all). Admission staff are also seeing a growing number of candidates who have been home-schooled and submit detailed narratives in lieu of transcripts.

What are officials looking for? Parents and students may underestimate the importance of secondary school course choices. Decisions made as early as junior high might have affected what classes a child was eligible to take later on and thus, how a college application will be evaluated, especially by the most selective institutions. Minimum high school graduation requirements vary, but most are less stringent than those expected at the more competitive colleges. Colleges normally have

recommended secondary school programs, not imperative ones.

Commonly, high schools grant diplomas to those who have completed a curriculum comparable to this:

- English: 4 (full year courses or equivalent)
- Social Studies/History: 2
- Mathematics: 2
- Science: 2 (usually plus physical education, health, and often keyboarding and electives)

While these minimum requirements are sufficient to allow admission to many not-so-selective schools, the more competitive institutions expect a program that looks more like this:

- English: 4
- Social Studies/History: 3
- Mathematics: 3
- Science: at least 2, preferably 3
- Foreign Language: 3 years of 1 language or at least 2 years of 2

Such suggested preparation will vary from college to college and from school to school within a university. Even different branches within the same university system may have different recommendations.

Predictably, schools with a technology emphasis look more closely at math and science backgrounds. Most entering MIT students have taken calculus before enrolling. If it's not offered at their high schools, they find it elsewhere. Similarly, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, strongly encourages applicants to take physics and chemistry in secondary school, as well as calculus or, at the very least, pre-calculus.

Here is an example of a strong four year academic program:

- English: 4 or more
- Social Studies/History: 3 or 4
- Mathematics: 4 years through calculus (or at least through pre-calculus)
- Science: at least 3 (with 2 or more lab sciences).
- Foreign Language: 4 of at least one language

Questions & Answers

Q: My daughter's high school is on a block system. How will college admission officers evaluate her transcript?

A: With so many high schools operating on a block system (where students take fewer, longer classes each term), this is not big news anymore. Admission officials realize that they have to make decisions before they see final grades (or any grades in some cases) in some important senior subjects. However, it's essential that they know which classes are planned. For example, if your daughter submits a first semester transcript that includes English, foreign language, and social studies/history, but expects to start calculus and physics in January, it should be made clear on her application.

Similarly, if your child's school uses a block system, make certain that this is made clear to admission officials so they'll realize that what may look like a single semester of a subject was really the equivalent of a full year course.

Admission officers expect to see a minimum of 5 solids or major subjects per term, plus at least one elective or minor subject (e.g., band, art—a "major" in some schools, yearbook, etc.). At schools on block or trimester systems or at some independent schools, fewer solids per term will be the norm. No matter how high your child is aiming, he or she will be well served by

pursuing a secondary school program that exceeds the basic requirements.

The most competitive colleges also expect that applicants will select the most challenging courses available. If there is a tracking system at your child's school, where students are grouped by ability, the transcript should indicate if classes have been at the highest level (e.g., Honors, Enriched, Level 1) or at a lower one (Standard, Level 2).

While such names vary from school to school, one coast-to-coast constant is the Advanced Placement designation. Schools that list Advanced Placement classes (usually for juniors and seniors, or just for seniors) are participating in a program offered by The College Entrance Examination Board based in Princeton, New Jersey, that enables high school students to take classes which may lead to college credit. Some secondary schools offer Advanced Placement courses in over a dozen subjects; others offer far fewer (or none at all).

International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are increasingly available in secondary schools in the U.S. and abroad. Initially designed for those who might be heading to non-American universities, this system is gaining stateside popularity among high schools interested in providing a widely acclaimed and challenging curriculum for strong students who can also gain college credit through IB participation and testing.

Ordinarily, Advanced Placement and IB classes, if offered, are the top-level courses taught in high schools and are well respected by all college officials. Because of their universal recognition, they jump off a transcript and put a spring in admission counselors' steps.

Questions & Answers

Q: Are "B"s in honors or Advanced Placement classes better than "A"s in less demanding ones?

A: "B"s in first-string classes are more impressive than "A"s in easier ones. Even an occasional "C" won't rule out a career at highly selective college (but tip-top applicants often have all or mostly "A"s in tip-top classes. We're not trying to ruin your day, we just want you to know what your son or daughter may be up against.). Yet, while the most competitive colleges do prefer the most competitive courses, there is room for fluctuation, and a second-level class in one or two weaker areas may work better for your child.

When computing class ranks, most high schools now use a weighted system where extra points are allotted for higher level classes, so the "B+" student in honors courses is likely to be ranked above the straight "A" student in the second tier. Colleges, too, are careful to note those high schools that do not use weighted ranks and take this into consideration when evaluating and comparing candidates. So, if your child attends such a school (and it's a good idea to ask), he won't be penalized for taking a tough load.

Admission professionals know that many high schools don't have Advanced Placement or IB programs and that some don't even have advanced or accelerated classes. Your child will be evaluated in light of what opportunities were available.

Q: My son wants to take part in a dual enrollment program at our local community college. How do admission officers view this?

A: Dual enrollment programs allow students to take some courses on a college campus for credit while they remain enrolled in high school classes. Admission officials are always pleased when students take advantage of challenging opportunities. However, while they will credit your son with making a wise choice, their institution may not necessarily award college credit for his work.

You may have grown up in the sixties, when there weren't as many opportunities to take Advanced Placement or IB classes or to head to a local college for high school credit. But what you might remember from your era is that some schools

abandoned courses like Biology II for those with a more "relevant" ring, like The Ecology of the Okefenokee. And while, in some schools, such selections still live on, their jazzy titles may be misleading. A tough and very serious class with a funny name may appear to admission officials to be what some dub "fluffy," "flimsy," or "lightweight. Fear not. Older admission officers understand this and even smile with appreciation or sigh with nostalgia when English turns up on such transcripts as Utopias and Dream Worlds, or science as Were Wilbur and Orville Right?

It may be up to you to point out the difficulties of benign-sounding offerings. Sometimes good guidance counselors will alert colleges to killer classes that masquerade as filler classes, but if Angie's "A" in astrology was her finest hour, let admission officers know—via parent letter or supplementary essay, etc.—just what it took to land it.

More common are cases like Cassandra's. She took a heavy schedule through her junior year and worked hard to knock off graduation requirements in order to "enjoy" her first senior term. She chose long-awaited electives like ceramics and photography in place of math and science. Her top-choice college viewed her transcript with disdain. Many families dwell on the importance of 11th grade without realizing that 12th grade courses are just as crucial.

Although the overall GPA is important, colleges realize that it is calculated on the basis of all four high school years. Class ranks are typically cumulative (based on three- or four year records). Admission officials tend to be believers in what they dub the "rising record," and may be willing to forgive freshman (and even sophomore) foibles when a student has shown impressive improvement as a junior and senior—the two years that get scrutinized most closely. They may be likewise willing to overlook one awful grade (or an entire catastrophic semester) if followed by a strong rebound (and remember, this is also where an explanatory letter or essay can help).

Colleges are also impressed by students who have sought enrichment opportunities outside of their school, both during the academic year or in the summer. Make sure that these are noted on the application.

Questions & Answers

Q: Don't admission officers from highly selective colleges prefer private school applicants?

A: Colleges, even the choosiest ones, do not prefer either private school or public school candidates. Since most students attend public high schools, the vast majority at all colleges are public school graduates. Diversity is now the clarion call, and that means drawing students from all sorts of backgrounds.

Parents sometimes believe that paying for private school is like buying an insurance policy that promises that their child will be admitted to a name college. However, while admission officers recognize that the top independent schools are excellent proving grounds for top colleges, they are also aware that there are some crummy private schools and many outstanding public ones. (Also, there are crummy students at outstanding schools and outstanding students at crummy schools!) Being a preppie can also backfire. Imagine what it's like to be one of 46 in a senior class to apply to Princeton or among 57 to aim for Brown. Of course, if you're at the head of such a list, the odds are with you, but those down the line a bit might have had a better shot from Sheboygan!

Q: My child switched high schools, and the move has meant some transcript irregularities. Will admission officials figure it all out?

A: Be certain that each college will receive a transcript (or several) that covers your child's entire high school career. This may be the perfect time to add an extra statement explaining why moves were made, and what impact they had on course choices. (e.g., "Velma missed biology" or "Louie took math courses out of sequence") Parents who anticipate relocation should look ahead, where possible, and check into curricular differences at the transfer school.

Test Results

Test scores are intentionally listed after transcripts to emphasize that they are less important, but they are also used in conjunction with transcripts. For example, Annie scarcely squeaked by when her first-choice college made its decisions. She had terrific test scores (1,400 SATs) but her record had more than its share of "C"s. Kirsten, on the other hand, would never have been admitted to her favorite college on her sorry scores alone, but admission officials were impressed with her "A" average and interesting choice of activities. In general, admission officials prefer students like Kirsten who have demonstrated their ability to perform well in school.

Additional considerations that admission officers keep in mind when reviewing test scores include:

- Is the testing pattern consistent? Did a student clearly have an off day?
- Are scores compatible with academic achievement. If not, why not?
- Are there strengths in one area (e.g., language, math, etc.) while others are weaker?
- Were tests taken under special conditions (e.g., extended time)? Does the student have a diagnosed disability?
- Does the student come from a disadvantaged background?
- Is English spoken at home?
- Were SAT II tests taken close to course completion or a year or more later? If language test scores were low, how many years of study has this student had?

Essays/Personal Statements

Remember, a great essay can really make an admission official sit up and take notice. However, subjectivity prevails here. Some readers are biased toward content; some toward writing style and mechanics. One applicant submitted an ambitious essay that compared the works of three Eastern European writers. Two of her evaluators were impressed by her literary sophistication and the insight of her analysis; a third couldn't get beyond the errors in spelling and sentence structure.

Recommendations

Quality and depth vary tremendously. Colleges don't penalize students when the recommendation is not well written or offers only superficial information. However, a clear and comprehensive letter of recommendation can make a difference. Specifics that admission professionals seek from recommendations include:

- Comparisons to others in the class; to those whom the teacher or counselor has worked with in past years; or with students who have enrolled at the college in question ("In twenty years of teaching, I have encountered few students as determined as Evan" or "Jamie reminds me of Susannah Leone whose test scores were equally dismal but who went on to graduate with honors from your college.")
- Information about grading and/or competition ("Mr. Jones rarely gives above a 'B'" or "This year's Advanced Placement English class was the most able this school has ever seen" or "Julie's 'C+' was the third highest grade in a class of 30.")
- Illustrative examples or anecdotes ("Jennifer is the swim team captain and a state record holder in the backstroke. However, her sensitivity is another special strength. She stays late after every practice to help a far weaker swimmer, to keep her from being cut from the team.")
- Personal information ("Ian struggled with his mother's drinking and finally caused an 'intervention' which led to her enrollment in a treatment program.")
- Other personal traits or study habits (e.g., maturity, response to criticism, acceptance by peers, timely completion of assignments, willingness to go beyond what is expected, participation in class discussions) The law entitles students to see completed recommendations. However, reference forms include a clause that most students sign to waive this right. This enables counselors and teachers to be candid, which is what admission officials prefer. (Recommendations normally do become part of a student's permanent file.)

Extracurricular Activities

THE GOOD NEWS: Colleges aren't terribly picky about how your child spends non-class time, as long as it's doing something meaningful. It isn't necessary to have a long list of activities, either. Commitment, some level of accomplishment, initiative, and leadership are far more important.

THE BAD NEWS: With so many high school students doing so much; with so many programs and organizations, teams and clubs and causes, it's hard to predict what will make a splash anymore. However, some activities do stand out more than others, and proper presentation can help admission officers look more closely at Davina's debate awards or Roger's rock-climbing.

When evaluating an applicant's extras, these are considerations that crop up during committee meetings:

- How much time does this student devote to an activity? How significant is the contribution? Admission professionals often favor depth over breadth. Phillip, for instance, attends most weekly chess club meetings. Coral, on the other hand, organized a chess clinic and tournament at a nearby junior high. It was such a success that she ran a second one at a homeless shelter, persuading local merchants to donate prizes.
- "Evidence of leadership" is a phrase that comes up often at admission committee meetings, and it can be what separates an accepted student from one who ends up on the wait list. There's a world of difference between the student who joined the Geography Club and the one who founded it. The more selective a college is, the more carefully this leadership role is examined. Some colleges are impressed by French Club presidents and yearbook business managers, while it takes a student council president or editor-in-chief to make a mark at others.
- Some balance is best. While there may not be as much talk of "wellroundedness" these days as there was back when Dobie Gillis and Ricky Nelson (and maybe you) went to college, varied ventures appeal to admission officers. The student who participates in the Science Club, the Drama Club, and is also on the tennis team usually stands out more than the one who only chooses athletics as extras. The good, yet not exceptional, player should also have other, different activities on the roster. Similarly, a balance of school related activities (clubs, teams, choirs, etc.) and those which take place elsewhere (volunteering, scouting, church groups, community theater, etc.) suggests that your child's horizons extend beyond the schoolyard.
- Volunteerism is very important, and the key here is real hands on involvement. Admission people are usually able to differentiate between the candidate who spends every Saturday tutoring at a storefront literacy center and the classmate who spent an hour on the Students Against Styrofoam Dance Decoration Committee.
- Specialists are exceptional. As Lee Coffin, dean of admissions at Connecticut College, points out, "The ideal of the well rounded student is important, but so is the well rounded class. So, within a class of 450 students, we have those who aren't the least bit well rounded but will bring something unique to the community." A few collegiate candidates will up their stock in admission officers' eyes by being extraordinarily talented in some area or with a truly off-the-wall interest or experience.

This may be the prima ballerina who dances six hours a day, pirouetting all the way to Prague with a national company, or the downhill skier, just one run away from a gold medal. Admission annals, too, are filled with stories about adolescent entrepreneurs who started home-baked cookie companies or computer software services and prodigies who published their own novels or built fighter jets in the garage.

Colleges appreciate uncommon undertakings: hand-bell ringers and Morris Dancers, magicians, skydivers, or dog trainers. Says one admission official, "It's exciting to see unusual activities on an application—not always the student council, the newspaper, or the yearbook."

A final note: You recognize how much effort went into planning the Booster Club barbecue; how tough it was to sacrifice a season of soccer for a semester in Sweden; how many lines your son had to learn for King Lear. But admission officers have heard it all before. Be sure that your child presents extracurricular activities and accomplishments well, and differentiates between meaningful and minimal contributions.

Interviews

Interview evaluations often confirm the impression made by other credentials in a folder. However, as you read earlier, an interview may also help a committee to see another side of a student, to understand why certain choices were made, to appreciate the extent of a commitment. Interview write-ups may even contain comments like "TAKE HER!!!" or "a solid student but I'd hate to have to room with him." In some cases, even a favorably impressed interviewer who isn't on a candidate's committee may go out of the way to lobby those who are for a "yes" verdict.

But remember, sometimes interviews are not weighed heavily in the decision-making process.

"Hooks"

A hook, in admission parlance, is any additional advantage that makes a candidate attractive to a particular college. This will vary from school to school and from year to year. Some candidates may try to hide their hooks, preferring to be admitted on only merit (parents tend to discourage this) while others will fight furiously to exploit even the most inconsequential connections. Such hooks may include athletic ability, minority status, veteran status, alumni connections, special talent (e.g., art, music, theater, writing, etc.), underrepresented socioeconomic background (e.g., first-generation college), geography, gender, VIP status, ability to pay full tuition, or miscellaneous institutional needs.

Having a hook can give a candidate a higher rating from the get-go or can pull an application from the deny pile and put it into the admit (or wait list) stack. Hooks come into play most often when judging equally qualified candidates. For example, if a college has to select one of two students who look the same on paper, and one is the daughter of an alumnus and the other is not, the daughter is probably going to get in over the non-connected student.

However, no matter how well connected or how gifted a student is outside of the classroom, if he doesn't have the grades or the ability, he won't—or shouldn't—be admitted. And, if he does get admitted for special reasons, those connections won't guarantee that he will succeed. One college even had to turn down its own president's son!

The hooks below are the ones discussed most often—and most passionately—in admission committee meetings:

Alumni Connections

While you shouldn't assume that your child is a shoo-in just because you went to the target school, you can assume that the folder will be reviewed very carefully and, if denied for any reason, the decision will be painful for the college. Smith, a college with an extensive alumnae admission effort, takes about 70 percent of its alumnae-connected applicants, as compared with only about 50 percent of its regular pool. If there is a particularly well-connected marginal applicant, the folder gets extra special attention.

Athletes

THE GOOD NEWS: Playing a sport can be an excellent way to give your child a boost at decision-making time. A superstar can earn a full scholarship; a less exceptional enthusiast can still up the odds of an acceptance.

THE BAD NEWS: Some students (and parents) overestimate the weight that athletic ability carries in the admission process—and they overestimate their ability period. Dave Shelbourne, a football coach and guidance counselor in Indiana, affirms that the "absolute first thing that I am asked by college recruiters is 'What about his grades?' 'Who are your best players who qualify academically?' When I worked in admissions at Wabash College, lots of parents weren't objective about their children's academic and athletic talent."

Some college coaches have a lot of clout in the admission office; others have far less. While many coaches will give a realistic assessment of how much a child's athletic prowess will count at decision time, never forget that it's the office of admission that gets the final say.

Students of Color

Colleges normally give students the option of describing themselves as members of these groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Black or African-American; Mexican-American or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Other Hispanic-American or Latin American; Asian American or Pacific Islander; or multiracial. Colleges aggressively recruit students from underrepresented minority populations, and financial aid opportunities are great. Some even set aside funds to pay travel expenses for these students to visit campus. Most admission offices have a counselor who is in charge of this effort, and this person can serve as a good source of information as well as an advocate in the process. While all admission counselors work together to attract a diverse student body, one may be charged with reading all folders of minority students—or at least have a major say in who gets admitted.

If your child has checked one of the categories above, he or she will probably get special consideration by admission committees—just how much consideration depends on the institution in question and your child's racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background. For example, Spelman College in Atlanta is a predominantly Black college for women that is eager to encourage Latina applicants.

Some families, especially Asians, are concerned that they have become an overrepresented minority on many campuses and that their cultural background may actually work against them. This is not true. What is true, however, is that while they are never discriminated against, they may lose their hook. They have essentially melted into the American melting pot. When a minority student (or any student) is from a disadvantaged family or community, credentials such as test scores, writing samples, and course selection are evaluated with that in mind.

Talent in the Arts

Being a painter or a poet, a musician, dancer, and so on, can really make an application stand out. A conservatory or art school will carefully examine each applicant's ability. For instance, Rhode Island School of Design requires a portfolio, in addition to three drawings (a bicycle, an interior or exterior environment, and a subject of the applicant's choice). Instructions are specific about what to draw, what size the paper must be, and how it should be folded, so students need to follow directions carefully.

In contrast, more generalized institutions may use such strengths to counterbalance weaker areas but don't necessarily have tapes, slides, or other submissions reviewed by professionals in the arts. But consider your child's artistic ability a hook only when it is exceptional (and not just by your standards!).

Geography

At a public college or university, being an in-state resident is obviously a hook. However, at many institutions, coming from an underrepresented region can also be an advantage. Southeastern colleges love to see North Dakota and Montana zip codes on applications, while southwestern schools welcome candidates from Vermont and Maine.

Parents, however, often worry when it seems as if too many of their child's classmates are aiming for the same colleges. They wonder if admission offices set quotas and ask how their child's decision might be affected when stronger cohorts have also applied.

Some high schools are known as "feeder schools" for certain colleges which means that many students typically apply and many, too, may be accepted. In such cases, your guidance counselor is familiar with the college in question and can help predict how your child will stack up. On the other hand, the more competitive colleges often want to cast a net broadly and include many different high schools in each entering class. In such cases, it may be a liability if your child is not as impressive a candidate as the others from her school—although just what impresses a college will vary. Decisions can likewise depend on which program within an institution your child desires. She may be turned down from the School of Engineering while her less able beau will be accepted by the School of Education.

Gerry Carnes, long-time guidance counselor at Brockton High School in Massachusetts, which graduates over 600 seniors a year, is no stranger to this dilemma. "If a student from BHS is applying to nearby Bridgewater State College, being one of 20 applicants is not a hindrance. However, if a student is one of only three or four applying to Brown, then having multiple applications from Brockton High could be a factor in who gets in. But students shouldn't shy away from applying—even someone who is #10 in a class where #5 is also a candidate. Depending on major and extracurricular activities, the college would not necessarily take the student with the higher rank."

The Invisible Hook—Institutional Needs

One reason that an applicant is admitted to a particular college while a similar- seeming (or even less able) applicant is not can be due to a fuzzy factor known as "institutional needs." These needs, explains Amherst College's Katharine Fretwell, are likely to vary from college to college, and—even within a single school—from year to year. One season, says Fretwell, an institution may be after more women, Midwesterners, or hockey goalies; the next time around it could be scientists or string musicians. "Applicants do not have control over these needs and are rarely aware of them," she notes. "And, according to outside observers (candidates, their counselors, parents, or classmates), the influence of these priorities may create some mysterious admission decisions."

Questions & Answers

Q: We've heard that some colleges admit students largely (or even entirely) based on an admission formula. Is this true and, if so, how often does it happen and how does it work? Who benefits most—or least—from this approach?

A: According to CollegeConfidential.com counselor Dave Berry, many large public universities get inundated with applications every year, and thus class rank, GPA, and standardized test scores determine a student's fate, not character, extracurricular commitments, writing skills, etc. "Stated too simply," he explains, "they just enter the numbers into a computer and let the software do the selecting." (An important exception, notes Berry, are the more competitive honors programs within a large university, where broader factors are considered.) Go-getters with the right statistics clearly benefit most from a formulaic approach, he maintains. Underachievers, late-bloomers, or even good students with unbalanced strengths may lose out.

Smaller schools, says Berry, rarely go on numbers alone and tend to be more willing to take risks on those whose potential seems to surpass past performance, and some large institutions frown on formulas as well.

"It's probably a bad rule of thumb," admits Berry, "but a guideline I've always carried around is that, if a college application doesn't require an essay (or at least ask for some shorter open-ended responses), students can probably expect to be competing with a numbers-oriented applicant database. The best way to find out whether an institution uses admission formulas is, of course, to ask."

Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down?

If you were a fly on the wall while an admission committee was meeting, this is what you would likely hear:

Readers begin by sharing the ratings they have given an applicant independently.

Commonly, there is consensus. If not, the bickering begins, as one committee member exclaims, "Look how well she plays the harp!" while another is pointing to a 390 math SAT.

At the most competitive colleges, candidates are not even discussed in committee unless they are firing on all cylinders, and excellent grades and scores must be a given. Then, explains Patricia Wei of Yale, "In committee, we say, 'This is a good student. Now what is special?' A lot of times we call an applicant 'solid.' It translates into 'fine, but nothing distinctive.' At other colleges where I've worked, 'solid' meant admissible, but here it's the kiss of death."

The goal is to assign an overall rating that every reader can live with. Contrary to what you might suspect, committees often give numerical or letter grades, rather than voting In or Out; Accept or Reject. For example, where an "A" to "F" scale is used, while readers may realize that "A" and "B" applicants are likely to be admitted and that "C" applicants stand a good chance as well, they won't know for sure until all folders have been rated and compared as a group. Since competition and space availability are not constant from year to year, cut-off points likewise vary. It's a serious and sensitive undertaking, but hardly an exact science.

Decisions are more clear-cut at the top and bottom of the pool. The toughest to make are about those students who fall in the middle. Here is where hooks—and each college's particular needs and priorities—really come into play. Moreover, colleges don't always go by the book when finalizing choices. There is room to make adjustments for "wild cards"—those candidates who, on the basis of statistics or in the light of tight competition, might be far from the top of the pile, yet have that special something that really knocked the socks off the readers.

There are also other fine-tuning issues such as shaping the overall composition of the class. Says Dean Lee Stetson of the University of Pennsylvania, "Eighty-five percent of those who apply would thrive here, but we have to choose among them. We're not looking for only the best numbers, but also for those who will make each freshman class the most interesting, the most 'yeasty,' the most representative of the broad-based society we live in ...and there is some element of crap shoot in the whole process."

Each institution must determine how many offers of admission to make in order to yield the desired number of entering students. For example, while one college must accept 1,000 candidates so that 500 will enroll, another may need to make only 750 offers to net the same total. In any case, colleges always admit more students than they expect to actually enroll. Although colleges are pretty good at making such estimates based on experience, it's impossible to always be right on the mark. Thus, your child may receive a letter of acceptance, a letter denying admission, or one that explains that he or she has been put on a wait list. Other specific admit decisions can include: Peterson's

- admission to the institution but not to the program of choice within it (programs, majors, and departments also use wait lists)
- admission without housing and/or financial aid
- conditional acceptance such as "contingent on receipt of SAT II scores" or "on completion of summer physics course"
- admission to a later term (e.g., acceptance for second semester)

While most decisions are announced in a form letter, special personal deny letters may be sent to offer counsel or to soften the blow. For instance, an applicant from a disadvantaged background may be encouraged to reapply after strengthening the academic record elsewhere.

Lest you think that admission officers are hardened and cold-hearted adjudicators, impervious to the feelings of applicants and their families, consider the words of William H. Peck, a former college admission dean and current director of college counseling at Santa Catalina School in California, "Remember that however disappointed you may be about an adverse decision on your child, the admission staff has experienced even more disappointments—those legions of wonderful students who looked at the college and never applied; who applied but were regretfully denied; who were admitted but chose to go elsewhere. We call them 'admissions' offices instead of 'rejections' offices for a reason—admitting students is, after all, the real goal and is a pleasure; denying them is a necessary element of the process, but an unpleasant task."