

CRITERIA

Important factors that are valued in the admissions process. Presented by My College Options

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There are certain factors that matter to many schools in the admissions process—we are going to use CRITERIA to describe them to you. As you are trying to find schools that match what you want in the college experience, remember colleges are trying to assess how you might fit into their freshman class.

Most schools use some of these criteria, some use the majority of these, and highly selective schools generally use all of them. Think about what your record indicates about you, the applicant, in each of these areas. (Remember, gaining admission to a highly selective school is more of an art than a science.)

C - Course Selection

What classes you take in comparison to what classes were available at your school does matter at the most competitive schools. If you want to swim in the highly selective sea, you need to have challenged yourself—you know, take AP Biology over Advanced Submarine Screen Door Repair.

Many a college admissions officer has been asked, "Is it better to take the harder course and risk a lower grade, or take the easier class and make an A?" Without skipping a beat, the big guys in the admissions world generally answer, "Take the harder course and make an A."

In many cases the side benefit of the tougher class is stronger preparation for the dreaded standardized tests. Take a deep breath and take the toughest academic program you can handle.

One thing to keep in mind is that most schools won't penalize you in the admissions process if your high school doesn't offer a course—the bigger problem can come when

your high school offers a challenging program and you opt out-probably not a good plan.

R - Rank

Many high schools rank their students: this means that your grade point average puts you in what position relative to everyone in your class. For example, your senior class has 300 students. Are you number 5 or number 285?

Some schools weight grade point averages for the purposes of determining rank-a manner used to reward students who take the harder classes and make the stronger grades.

Some schools, especially smaller college prep schools, elect not to rank. If your school doesn't rank, it is likely that they have a document called a school profile that explains grading, test scores, class achievements, etc.-something a college can use in analyzing your transcript and accomplishments as they evaluate your application.

I - Interests

Many students overlook this area. You probably shouldn't. Colleges want to craft a class-a diverse group of individuals who will make their university a special learning, thriving community. In order to do that, they do look to find musicians, writers, rocket scientists, social activists, community servants, etc...

If you have a special skill or accomplishment-don't be bashful about it. It could be the hook that helps you gain admission. Interests are ways for students to show what they bring to the non-academic side of the college admissions puzzle-campus life is composed of more than library bookworms.

T - Tests

This is the area that strikes fear into most of your hearts. Yes, the ACT and SAT I are here to stay-at least for the foreseeable future. Most schools will use either test in the admissions process.

How do you find out which ones are used at the colleges you are interested in? ASK! You can also check out the college Web site or the printed materials the college sends you. Always rely on the college as the ultimate authority in this area. It comes as a surprise to many students that you really can prepare for these tests.

* NEWS FLASH #1: The makers of both tests spend megabucks every year constructing test prep guides that are free and test prep materials that they sell to help students prepare for these tests.

* NEWS FLASH #2: Did you prepare for the written test you took to get your driver's license? I'll bet you did. Do you study for your History exam? Did I hear another yes? While it is true that the best preparation you can have for these tests is to really work in your classes every day and read, read, read, working with some test prep materials is

generally a good thing. Did you realize the Taking the SAT I and Preparing for the ACT put out by the makers of the test contain actual retired tests?

* NEWS FLASH #3: The directions on the day of the test are exactly the same as those in the official prep materials. Get comfortable with the format. You don't have to spend a fortune to improve your test scores. You do have to do some work. What you elect to do in the test prep area is up to you, but you definitely should take these tests seriously and you should remember that preparation is a good thing.

E - Essays

Colleges use essays to try to get to know the real you-to see something besides a GPA, rank, test score and/or what subjects you have taken.

Let me assure you if they ask you to write an essay, personal statement or submit a graded writing sample-they are going to read it. Be yourself. Write about what means something to you. Do not try to write what you think they want to hear and, by all means, answer the question (s) you are asked.

Remember, they want your work-the essay should be an honest effort and representation of how you write. Some schools have one or two long essays, others have several short answer questions.

Colleges sometimes ask students to suggest questions that they use on later applications. It's up to you to plan your time for writing-does the word procrastination mean anything to you? Many students get themselves into a real time crunch, completing the entire application-except the essay.

If you want the application process to go smoothly, tackle the essay head on, proofread, and move on.

R - Recommendations

Some schools require teachers, counselors, employers, activity moderators, or others to evaluate you in terms of their specific relationship with you.

Someone who really knows you well and can write about what they know generally will make the best letter writer. For example, how does your AP English teacher see you in class? How well do you write, participate in class discussions, or go into depth in the study of the subject? At your job, are you a good employee who shows initiative?

Also, give your letter writers a stamped, addressed envelope with their return address on it when you ask them to write you a letter.

The best recommendations round out the picture of you as a person, student, and activity participant just like your essay does. They are anecdotal-they tell very specific stories about you and how you have contributed to your school, community, workplace, etc...

Students often think they must get recommendations only from teachers from whom they earned really good grades. Sometimes the teacher who watched you struggle and overcome some difficulties is a better choice. Think seriously about who you want to write those recommendations. Talk with your school counselor about your choices.

A word of caution - colleges will not want you to send a small book of recommendations- their phrase is: the thicker the file, the thicker the student. If a college asks for two recommendations, generally it is advisable to stick to those two. If you have a compelling reason to send more (ask your counselor or the college representative about this) submit one additional letter of recommendation, and make sure it is from someone who truly knows you in a way that what they write in the letter will add substantially to the college's understanding of who you really are.

I - Interviews

Probably after standardized tests, the interview causes the second most fear and trembling in the college applicant pool.

At some schools, the interview is much more critical than at others. Take heart. Not every school requires or recommends interviews. If an interview is used, ask what its role is in the admissions process.

Interviews can take place on campus, in your home, at your school, at the interviewer's home or office, etc...

Admissions officers, alums, and currently enrolled students are generally the most common interviewers. If you have an interview, there are a few tips that may help you deal with the situation. Know why you think you want to attend this school-what about the school is appealing to you? What will you bring to the college environment?

You don't have to know with certainty what you want to major in-just be able to show you have given the topic, and this particular school, some serious thought.

A word of caution - think about what appropriate dress and conduct could mean in the interview situation. It probably isn't prudent to dress as if you are already a college freshman.

Take the interview as an opportunity for you to learn about the school and the school to learn about you. Be yourself. At the end of the day, that is the best technique for both you and the interviewer to assess whether you the student will be a good fit in the college admissions puzzle at this particular university.

A - Academics

Performance does count-even at a school that doesn't take all the CRITERIA factors into consideration, how you have achieved in the setting you are in is seen as a predictor of how you might perform on the academic side of the college experience.

One of the major functions of earning a college education is to impart knowledge and prepare you for a career. Grades are seen as an indicator of your preparedness to participate in this part of the college life. It is an inescapable reality and it is a message you may really want to take to heart.

It's likely that the sooner you get this message, the better your chances of gaining admission to the schools that interest you.

To be an informed consumer in the college admissions process, ask which of these factors matter at the schools to which you want to apply - It seems simple, but the direct approach usually provides the best information. Take time and carefully look over where you stand on each of these points. Be honest with yourself. Remember there are very few absolutes -- the selection process is an art, and art is more subjective than science. Good luck in making your college search count for you.