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How Do Colleges Evaluate Applicants?

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colleges look for students that are fully engaged in a few activities

beyond the classroom. Call it "passion," "commitment" or "perseverance," the basic premise remains the same. Just as an employer is not impressed by an applicant who bounces from one job to the next, neither is a college impressed by a student who presents a long list of short-term activities. Thus it is important to demonstrate what I call "depth rather than breadth" in your extracurricular activities. A long-term commitment to the school debate team is good. Better still is winning local, regional, and even national competitions. The same is true for music, sports and science. Colleges also like to see evidence of leadership because this level of participation often translates into an intellectually curious, enthusiastic individual that adds vibrancy to a college campus. President of a student club or editor of the school newspaper are high school leadership positions, while leadership that extends beyond to local, regional and state organizations is even more notable to college admissions officers.

Put Things In Perspective: It is important to take charge of what you can control about the admissions process. Many seniors have not participated in any leadership role. After all, there are far more students than leadership positions! In this case you can highlight your support role in activities, or a record of employment or community service that distinguishes you as an applicant. And be sure to write a carefully thought out essay that highlights your strengths. Remember that the more selective the school, the more it takes to impress the admissions staff. Using that general rule of thumb will help you frame your chances for admission to any particular college. And if you have a well balanced college list, you should get your share of positive responses.

There are many factors that play a role in successful college admissions, and sometimes the decisions of admission officers are puzzling. One student with a very strong academic record may be turned down from a school, while a classmate with less impressive grades is accepted. This article sheds light on the important factors that colleges consider as they review applications. There is no magic formula to guarantee admission to any college, but it is important to know how schools evaluate applicants.

Academic Record: First and foremost, the academic record is the heart of the college application; the courses taken and grades achieved show evidence of the student's ability to handle the demands of college. Going beyond the minimum recommended for admission to a particular school is always viewed favorably. Colleges also look to see if the student took advantage of additional challenging coursework offered at their high school, such as AP and Honors classes. Strong performance in these classes indicates that a student is prepared to do college level work. Of course, colleges recognize that the grades students receive in high school can be hard to evaluate in isolation. Some high schools and some teachers are more generous with grades, while others are more rigorous. College admissions officers are familiar with the schools located in the regions to which they are assigned. Grade inflation has become a serious issue, so this is one reason why colleges like to see students do well on AP exams as well as in the coursework itself.

Standardized Testing: The SAT and ACT play an important role in admissions. These tests are often viewed as objective measures because they are independent of the grading standards of high schools. But the tests are not without their critics and most colleges do not over rely on them because of concerns about what the tests are really measuring. The growth of a test prep industry that guarantees significant score improvement for students who can afford to take special courses has linked success on the exam with the ability to pay for tutoring. Understandably, colleges have become skeptical of the result, which leads them to take level of affluence into account when evaluating test scores.

Extracurricular Record: Perhaps the least understood ingredient in the mix of factors that influence admission decisions is the student's extracurricular record. Colleges today try to admit a well-rounded freshman class. Well over a decade ago, colleges began to realize that a well-balanced student was becoming harder to find. Students simply could not spread themselves so thin and still excel. Today,

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