

## **An Insider's View: Unlocking the Mysteries to College Admission**

All college admissions are not created equal. Every school has its own quirky way of establishing the “perfect formula.” Having worked in college admissions for four years, I will share with you an insider's view for selective college admissions.

**Academic Record:** Above all else, schools will focus primarily on your academic record. Schools desire for students to choose the most challenging curriculum available to them. In most schools, this translates into honors, AP or IB curriculum. The college admissions staff will measure your curriculum against what your school offers. In addition, specialty schools weigh certain classes more heavily. For instance, an engineering school places more emphasis on your physics and calculus classes. GPAs mean less than in previous decades since so many schools' grading scales differ. As a result, most colleges will ask for your class rank to determine how you fare against your peers. Regardless of what high schools say, they do rank. Many high schools prefer to give colleges ranges (i.e. first decile, second quintile, etc), since the ranges cast you in the best light.

**Standardized Tests:** Even though some colleges are beginning to forgo the SAT or ACT as admissions criteria, most still use this resource religiously. Most colleges' approach to the new version of the SAT is one of “wait and see.” Each school publishes its middle 50% range. This number is a good indicator of the typical student the school accepts. Keep in mind though, this range may be skewed either way depending upon how many students they accept in-state, the number of alumni children, and special talented applicants (i.e. athletes, etc.). In most cases, the schools will accept your highest combined score; therefore, you should take the tests more than once. In addition, those students receiving extended time in their classes may be eligible for extended time on standardized tests as well. In the past, ETS placed an asterisk next to scores with extended time, but this is no longer the case. Highly selective schools will also require SAT Subject tests, but these tests are primarily used for placement upon arrival or as one more criterion in scholarship competitions.

**Activities:** In general, smaller schools examine your activities more thoroughly than larger schools because they desire to see how you will contribute to their communities. Passion is the “buzz” word in the admissions world. One's passion typically translates into depth in one or more activities. Ironically enough, those students whose resumes look the best in high school oftentimes are burned out by the time they get to college and don't do anything! Thus, schools like to see leadership, dedication and commitment. You will serve yourself better to invest more time in a handful of sustained activities rather than to participate on a surface level in many activities. While working in admissions, I would keep track of all of our class presidents, captains of athletic teams, state athletes, editors, Eagle Scouts and Gold Award winners; all of these activities demonstrate determination and persistence. Your activities serve as a reflection of what you value. Are your activities an accurate reflection?

**Essays:** Essays demonstrate your effectiveness in communicating. Delve into an unexplored area of your personality. Be yourself. If you are a funny individual, then let

your sense of humor shine through your writing. I can assure you, if you are not funny and try to be funny, that will shine through as well. The most compelling essays revolve around the mundane activities that you are able to breathe life into or a compelling situation that shows a portion of your personality. Be warned: admissions professionals read mountains of essays. If you do not prove your worth in the first paragraph, the reader will skim the rest of the essay. Most readers are able to tell you within the first few sentences exactly where the essay will conclude.

**Recommendations:** If recommendations are required, schools prefer recommendations from a math or science teacher and an English or history teacher. Make sure you ask your teacher properly and allow him or her plenty of time to write your recommendation. In addition, you never know what a teacher may write in a recommendation, so choose someone who knows you well, ideally both inside and outside the classroom. Additional recommendations are permitted by most schools, but include these sparingly. Alumni recommendations oftentimes will hold more weight depending on their ties to the university.

**Interviews:** If a university gives interviews, only sign up for one if (a) you are required to do so or (b) your personality will shine through in a positive way. Prepare knowledgeable questions, look the interviewee in the eye and ask for his or her card. Most schools track interest; thus, consistent contact (do not stalk) will improve your chances.

There is no such thing as the “perfect” school for everyone; rather, the goal is to find the “perfect” fit for you.

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## **SIDEBAR**

1. When colleges visit your high school or in your area, make sure you check out the latest information on their schools. Remember, schools track interest.
2. Register early for the SAT at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) in order to ensure your preferred location. Studies have shown taking the SAT in your home school or a familiar environment increases scores. This website also offers a bevy of materials and insight to improve your score.
3. Analyze your PSAT results to determine what areas you are deficient. The results, along with the test booklet, should be sent to your home school.
4. Campus visits, friends at the college, and college newspapers provide you the insider’s view to your college of choice. The curbside appeal of a school may diminish or increase once you get the real story.
5. Do your homework: [www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org) offers a wealth of student resources on the left hand column.

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