

# 6 Common College Admissions Myths

Get a feel for how much grades, tests and your essay really matter from those who review the applications.

By Stacey Colino and Margaret Loftus; Sept. 20, 2021

College admissions officers are well aware of how different high school curricula are because they work with many of the same schools every year and receive detailed profiles of the course offerings, along with context about the student body.

When applying to college, many students think they know which strategies will help them attract the attention – in a good way – of admissions officers. But there's often a gap between perception and reality about what actually matters, and what matters most, when it comes to grades, test scores, extracurricular activities and other factors. And what holds true in this unprecedented time will differ in some ways from the norm.

Many colleges report that, while academic performance is key, they take a multifaceted approach to reviewing applicants, looking well beyond what can be seen on a transcript, says Joe Shields, an admissions counselor at Goucher College in Baltimore. "A holistic admissions review process allows a student to demonstrate their best qualities and discuss how they would be a good fit for that college," he says.

Another often misunderstood fact: It's not as difficult as many students think to get admitted to a college, beyond the most selective schools. A 2019 report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling revealed that, on average, two-thirds of first-time freshman applicants were offered admission to a four-year school in the U.S. Some 80% of places accepted 50% or more of applicants.

"There are many good colleges you may not have heard of," says Hannah Serota, founder and CEO of Creative College Connections, a consulting practice dedicated to helping applicants find the right fit.

- Read on for a look at six other persistent myths about college admissions
- Getting all A's is the most important thing.
- Getting Test scores can make or break your chances of getting in.
- The more clubs and activities on your resume, the better.
- You should ask for a recommendation only from a teacher who gave you an A.
- It's a mistake to get creative with your essay.
- To make yourself memorable, you need to visit the campus.

## Myth 1: Getting All A's Is the Most Important Thing

Of course, your grades matter. But what that means depends on a college's selectivity as well as the classes you took, based on the offerings at your high school. Some places offer more honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses than others, and a B in

one of these more challenging courses can signify a higher level of mastery than an A in a grade-level class at a school with both.

College admissions officers are often well aware of how high school curricula are different from one school to another because they work with many of the same ones every year and receive detailed profiles of the course offerings, along with context about the student body.

"GPAs can present very differently from each institution to the next," says Janine Bissic, an education consultant and former director of admission at Whittier College in California.

For the next few years, college admissions officers will be evaluating transcripts that may have one or two terms that appear quite different from applicants' overall records, thanks to the varied experiences students have had studying from home during the coronavirus pandemic. They plan to be forgiving to those who, say, didn't receive letter grades for a semester or two.

Everyone evaluating applicants is in the same boat, says Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor for enrollment at the University of Denver. He expects counselors to "remain empathetic and flexible" as they weigh candidates. "We are trying to find reasons to admit students," he says.

That said, admissions officers will, as usual, look for evidence that applicants can succeed in college.

At Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, "we would expect the most rigorous schedule that's appropriate for the student and the highest grades. We would be looking for both," says Douglas Christiansen, vice provost for university enrollment affairs and dean of admissions and financial aid.

Being able to handle a challenging course load while maintaining strong marks is a signal that you have the academic grit and discipline to handle college-level work.

Balance is also key. Taking a handful of AP classes can help you look good, but more isn't always better; the idea is to take the most rigorous set of courses that makes sense given your abilities. While a B in an AP English literature class may be more impressive than an A in a grade-level class, a C or D isn't likely to wow anyone.

"Challenge yourself where you are strong, and then work hard and do well in all of your courses," advises Clark Brigger, executive director of admissions at the University of Colorado–Boulder. Now that the College Board has eliminated the SAT subject tests, doing well on AP exams may be an increasingly important data point for highly selective colleges, Serota says.

"When a student takes a challenging course and does well, it is predictive of how they will perform in college," Brigger says. "However, there are always some students who stretch too far and then struggle with their performance and subsequently their health."

If your grades dropped during a semester when you had personal hardships, such as a parent's job loss or a serious illness or death in the family, it's wise to explain the reason somewhere in your application. If the issue is coronavirus-related, the Common App and Coalition Application have provided optional ways for applicants to elaborate.

Don't be discouraged if your grades weren't where you'd have liked them to be early in high school. Many admissions officers look for an upward trend, improvements over time that enable a student to finish strong.

"At the end of the day, we want to feel confident that if we admit a student, they can handle the rigor of the courses," says Yvonne Romero da Silva, vice president for enrollment at Rice University in Houston.

## **Myth 2: Test Scores Can Make or Break Your Chances of Getting In**

Test scores are just one element of the application package. "There are many students we've denied with perfect test scores because they didn't have anything else to set them apart," Christiansen says.

Even in normal times, different institutions place varying levels of importance on standardized tests. This year, some two-thirds of colleges and universities, including the eight Ivy League schools, are or are expected to be test-optional or test-blind for fall 2022 admissions.

In many cases, schools are extending this beyond next fall. The University of Maryland–College Park is one of many state flagships temporarily suspending their test requirements. The University of California system settled a lawsuit in May that claimed the tests discriminate against disadvantaged students; it won't consider scores at all in admissions decisions, although the agreement left open the possibility of using a new test in the future.

Even before the pandemic, many schools were shifting their test policies to optional, including Ohio Wesleyan University, the University of Denver and the University of Chicago. Bowdoin College in Maine has been test-optional for more than half a century. This trend is partly because admissions officers recognize that many applicants have intellectual abilities and academic strengths that aren't reflected in exam scores.

But before you decide to skip the tests, consider whether you'll be applying for scholarships, some of which may depend on the scores to qualify applicants, and whether having good results might be beneficial to your chances even at a test-optional school. Colleges and universities publish the data related to incoming classes online, so officials suggest that students can benchmark their own exam results and weigh whether it might enhance their application to submit scores.

Among colleges that do require the SAT or ACT, many "superscore," which means they use your best section-level scores even if they're from different test dates. In other words, if your SAT reading score was 70 points higher the second time you took the test but your math score was 50 points higher on the first, the better of both attempts is what the admissions office looks at.

## **Myth 3: The More Clubs and Activities on Your Resume, the Better**

Quality means more than quantity when it comes to extracurricular activities, college admissions experts note.

"Being passionate about key interests is more important than joining a lot of clubs," says Christiansen. "We're looking for depth and progression of leadership, not just participation."

David Senter, a 2020 graduate of Rice, thinks his experience swimming competitively and working his way up to varsity team captain helped demonstrate his dedication and added something important to his strong academic record, along with his participation on the academic quiz bowl team.

"You have to show you care," Senter says. "I was never the fastest, and I never went to the state championships, but I showed up every day and bonded with the team."

When reviewing your contributions outside of the classroom, admissions officers really want to know things like: What did you do in high school that made an organization better or furthered its cause and helped you grow? What are you doing with your time that would contribute to our campus in a meaningful way if you were to come here?

"Colleges are looking for a well-rounded student body, not necessarily a well-rounded student," Serota says.

These days, of course, they will have to be sensitive to the fact that some students weren't able to participate in extracurricular activities for an extended period because of the pandemic.

"Admissions officers won't red flag a gap in, say, debate participation," says Mimi Doe, co-founder of the counseling firm Top Tier Admissions. "But for very top schools, they want to see what a student did instead. How they reached out beyond their own school and became engaged, even online, in some sort of initiative."

Even in normal times, some students simply don't have time for clubs and sports because of family obligations. Rather, they might need to take care of younger siblings after school or hold a job.

Admissions staffers get it. If that's the case, students would do well to be honest about their situation and to focus on the qualities that emerge from those experiences and what they get out of them, says Stacey Kostell, chief executive officer for the Coalition for College, a group of more than 150 colleges and universities dedicated to increasing students' access to higher education.

#### **Myth 4: You Should Ask for a Recommendation Only From a Teacher Who Gave You an A**

The best person to ask for a letter of recommendation isn't necessarily a teacher who gave you an A. It's better to consider whether a teacher can help admissions officers get to know a different side of you and better understand who you are. You might choose the teacher who taught your most difficult class, for example, or a class you thought you wouldn't like but did.

Students "should really be looking for recommendations from teachers and mentors who know them especially well and can give rich context to their work ethic, character, persistence and growth," Bissic says.

Shields agrees: "If you struggled with a subject and had a good rapport with the teacher, you can get a helpful recommendation if the teacher can talk about how you came for extra help or you were able to advocate for yourself."

### **Myth 5: It's a Mistake to Get Creative With Your Essay**

The key job of your essay is to reveal something about who you are. If you're not funny, don't try to be. If you're not impassioned about a controversial subject, don't pretend to be.

"You need to make the case for why you care about something and what you're doing about it," Serota advises. But think carefully about choosing to share a mental health issue or a drug problem, for instance. "Be careful about revealing things that would make the reader feel a sense of caution about you," Serota says.

And while you may be tempted to write about how the pandemic affected you and your family, consider that admissions officers will likely be inundated with essays on the topic.

"It's likely to blend in, and it becomes that much more difficult to stand out," says Ethan Sawyer, founder of the College Essay Guy website and author of "College Admission Essentials." He encourages students to instead use the extra space provided by the Common and Coalition applications to describe the effects of the pandemic on their families.

An essay's most important quality is that it should feel authentic, Serota and others say. Make sure that it addresses the prompt, but also think of your essay as an opportunity to reveal your true voice and to highlight who you really are. Admissions folks are experts at distinguishing between viewpoints that feel genuine and those that don't. The most compelling essays reveal something about an applicant's personality, Kostell says.

When it comes to large universities in particular, it may be hard to believe that there are human beings who are actually reading and giving careful consideration to your app, but it's true. During the review process, "multiple sets of eyes read every piece of the application, essay and letters of recommendation," says Brigger, whose university reviewed more than 54,000 first-year applications this past cycle.

"Admissions officers and university faculty and staff are the ones making admissions decisions, not a computer or automated process," Brigger says. The essay is your opportunity to connect and make an impression.

### **Myth 6: To Make Yourself Memorable, You Need to Visit the Campus**

A campus visit, real or virtual, can be helpful in more ways than one. Since the pandemic brought in-person visits to a screeching halt, schools have introduced a wide range of virtual options, from informal chats to "tours" that are meant to offer students a taste of campus life.

Many competitive colleges are using these new approaches as one tool to gauge an applicant's demonstrated interest. This can be shown in various ways: by calling or emailing with questions, requesting a virtual interview, contacting alumni or interacting with a representative on social media or, when possible, at a college fair.

Some 40% of colleges indicate that demonstrated interest is a moderately or considerably important factor in decisions, according to the most recent NACAC data.

Admissions officers can track how many contacts you've had with their institution, and they can even see if you've opened and engaged with emails.

"The artificial intelligence and the way they use data has become super sophisticated," Doe says.

As colleges begin fully welcoming in-person visitors again, spending a day on campus sitting in on a class and talking with students, or perhaps attending a summer program for high schoolers at a college that appeals to you, can both signal your interest and help you and the admissions office establish whether you'll be a good fit. That's key.

"Fit continues to be the most important factor to us – we want students to succeed here," says Marc Harding, vice provost for enrollment at the University of Pittsburgh.

Participating in such a program shows that you're passionate and curious enough about a subject to take it to the next level, too. And that says a lot about your level of college readiness.

*This story is excerpted from the U.S. News "Best Colleges 2022" guidebook, which features in-depth articles, rankings and data.*

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