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Chapter 3 Factors in Admission Decisions

There is no definite plan or specific combination of factors that will guarantee a student admission to their preferred institution. Colleges and universities review many aspects of prospective student applications in order to determine which students will be admitted. In addition to considering the merits of each applicant, most universities also consider the composition of the entering class as a whole in order to ensure that a diverse group of students with a variety of academic and extracurricular interests will enrich the campus experience. Institutional characteristics, such as enrollment size and acceptance rate, also impact the importance of admission factors.

Factors in Admission Decisions: First-Time Freshmen, Fall 2018 (see Table 7)

- Academic performance in high school has been the most important consideration in

freshman admission decisions for decades. Seventy-five percent of colleges rated grades in all high school courses as considerably important, and 73 percent rated grades in college prep courses as considerably important. Strength of curriculum was rated considerably important by more than 60 percent of colleges and nearly half gave admission test scores (ACT/SAT) considerable weight.

- A second set of factors were most often considered to be moderately important. These factors tend to provide insight regarding the personal qualities and interests of students, as well as offer more detail on academic performance. They include essays or writing samples; teacher and counselor recommendations; student's demonstrated interest; class rank; and extracurricular activities.
- A final group of admission decision factors were given moderate or considerable

importance, on average by a small percentage of institutions, likely because most of the factors are relevant only to a small subset of colleges. They included subject test scores (AP, IB), portfolios, SAT II scores, interviews, state graduation exams scores, and work experience.

Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen: Change Over Time (see Table 8)

The relative importance of many admission decision factors have remained remarkably stable over the long term. Notable exceptions include the declining importance of class rank and interviews.

While academic performance has remained the most important consideration for colleges, in recent years, specific changes in the top factors have become evident. For many years, grades in college prep courses had been rated as the top factor in admission decisions, followed

TABLE 7. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2017

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in All Courses	220	74.5	15.0	5.5	5.0
Grades in College Prep Courses	220	73.2	16.8	5.9	4.1
Strength of Curriculum	219	62.1	21.9	8.7	7.3
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	221	45.7	37.1	12.2	5.0
Essay or Writing Sample	220	23.2	33.2	24.1	19.5
Student's Demonstrated Interest	218	16.1	23.9	28.0	32.1
Counselor Recommendation	218	15.1	40.4	26.6	17.9
Teacher Recommendation	219	14.2	40.2	26.5	19.2
Class Rank	220	9.1	29.1	34.1	27.7
Extracurricular Activities	219	6.4	42.9	32.0	18.7
Portfolio	219	6.4	11.9	26.9	54.8
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	219	5.5	18.3	35.2	41.1
Interview	219	5.5	16.4	28.3	49.8
Work	217	4.1	28.6	36.9	30.4
State Graduation Exam Scores	218	2.3	8.7	18.8	70.2
SAT II Scores	216	1.9	5.6	14.8	77.8

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19.

by strength of curriculum, admission test scores, and grades in all courses (overall GPA). However, for the past three admission cycles (2016, 2017, and 2018), the percentage of colleges rating grades in all courses as considerably important has matched or surpassed grades in college prep courses.

Class rank has become much less important over the past decade. For each admission cycle from Fall 2016 to Fall 2018, only 9 percent of colleges rated class rank as considerably important, compared to 23 percent in 2007.

Factors in Admission by Institutional Characteristics for First-Time Freshmen, Fall 2018

The top four admission decision factors for first-time freshmen are consistent across all types of institutions. However, institutional characteristics determined the relative level of importance assigned to some admission factors.

Institutional Control

- Private colleges placed relatively more importance on the essay/writing sample, the interview,

counselor and teacher recommendations, demonstrated interest, extracurricular activities, and work.

- Public colleges valued admission test scores more highly than private institutions.

Enrollment Size

- Smaller colleges gave comparatively more weight to the interview, teacher and counselor recommendations, and demonstrated interest.
- Larger colleges tended to place more value on admission test scores.

TABLE 8. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING “CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE” TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2007 TO FALL 2018

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Grades in College Prep Courses	80%	75%	87%	83%	84%	82%	82%	79%	—	77%	71	73
Grades in All Courses	52	52	46	46	52	50	52	60	—	77	81	75
Strength of Curriculum	64	62	71	66	68	65	64	60	—	52	51	62
Admission Test Scores	59	54	58	59	59	56	58	56	—	54	52	46
Essay or Writing Sample	26	27	26	27	25	20	22	22	—	19	17	23
Class Rank	23	19	16	22	19	13	15	14	—	9	9	9
Counselor Recommendation	21	20	17	19	19	16	16	17	—	15	11	15
Demonstrated Interest	22	21	21	23	21	18	20	17	—	14	16	16
Teacher Recommendation	21	21	17	19	17	15	14	15	—	11	7	14
Interview	11	11	7	9	6	7	8	4	—	5	4	6
Extracurricular Activities	7	7	9	7	5	7	10	6	—	8	4	6
Work	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	1	—	3	2	4
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	7	8	7	10	7	5	8	7	—	7	4	6
State Graduation Exams	4	4	3	4	4	2	3	4	—	2	2	2
SAT II Scores	6	7	5	5	5	4	6	5	—	2	7	2
Portfolio	—	7	8	6	7	5	6	7	—	6	5	6

—Data are not available.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Surveys, 2007-08 through 2018-19.

TABLE 9. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INFLUENCE TO STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FALL 2018

	N	Considerable Influence	Moderate Influence	Limited Influence	No Influence
<i>FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN</i>					
High School Attended	221	4.5	19.0	32.1	44.3
Race/Ethnicity	219	6.8	17.8	16.9	58.4
State or County of Residence	220	4.1	22.3	17.3	56.4
First-generation Status	220	5.5	25.5	20.9	48.2
Ability to Pay	221	1.2	4.2	13.7	81.0
Gender	221	3.2	10.4	18.6	67.9
Alumni Relations	220	0.9	11.8	35.0	52.3

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19.

Selectivity

- Institutions that were more selective placed more emphasis on grades in college prep courses and strength of curriculum.
- More selective colleges also rated more highly the essay/writing sample, counselor and teacher recommendations, extracurricular activities, and work.

(See Appendix Table B.1. for a correlation matrix of statistically significant associations.)

Student Characteristics as Contextual Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen, Fall 2018 (see Table 9)

Colleges were asked to rate the influence of certain student characteristics—race/ethnicity, first-generation status, high school attended, state or county of residence, gender, alumni relations, and ability to pay—in terms of how they affect evaluation of the

main admission factors. Although, for the most part, college admission officers give little importance to these characteristics, there are some findings worth noting.

For example, nearly one-third of colleges (31 percent) rated first-generation status as at least moderately important in first-time freshmen admission decisions. About one-quarter of colleges considered high school attended, race/ethnicity, and state or county of residence as either moderately or considerably important (24 percent, 25 percent, and 26 percent, respectively).

Interesting differences also were found in the relative importance given to these factors based on institution type. Data provided on the NACAC 2018–19 Admission Trends Survey allowed for comparison by institutional characteristics.

Institutional Control

- Private institutions gave greater consideration to race/ethnicity,

gender, high school attended, alumni relations, and ability to pay when evaluating applications.

Enrollment

- Alumni relations and ability to pay were rated as having more influence in admission decisions for smaller colleges.
- Larger colleges gave greater consideration to state or county of residence and first-generation status.

Selectivity

- When evaluating applications, institutions that were more selective placed more emphasis on each of these student characteristics—race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, state or county of residence, high school attended, alumni relations, and ability to pay.

(See Appendix Table B.2. for a correlation matrix of statistically significant associations.)