

Factors in U.S. Admission Decisions

Dear Students & Parents,

Each year, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) releases their annual **State of College Admission (SOCA)** report. On the following pages, you will find the most informative and helpful chapter for students and parents. Chapter 3 confirms what we know about how U.S. institutions make decisions - that '**considerable importance**' is placed on:

Grades in all courses + Grades in college preparation (DP) courses (See tables to compare for 'Freshmen' vs. 'International students')

As a DP student, this means that Grade 11 is the key year, as students normally apply in the fall of grade 12 with their Grade 11 June results. These results take on increased significance when a student intends to apply Early Action/Early Decision, as the decision will be made before the Grade 12 January results are available.

Strength of curriculum (See tables to compare for 'Freshmen' vs. 'International students')

As a DP student, this base is covered. The IB Diploma Programme is widely regarded as among the most rigorous preparation for higher education. Institutions often grant extra GPA credit to DP students, particularly for HL courses, as well as advanced credit standing for first-year courses.

Standardized tests scores (See tables to compare for 'Freshmen' vs. 'International students')

Although there are a growing number of wonderful institutions that are [test-optional and/or test flexible](#), a number of institutions still place a strong emphasis on ACT and/or SAT results in the decision, especially the more selective ones.

Chapter 3 also highlights some other interesting information that students can act on. For example, '**Essay or writing sample**' and '**Demonstrated Interest**' are two other elements of the application that are entirely within the students' control.

More and more U.S. institutions are using big data to factor '**demonstrated interest**' into their decisions. Institutions want to admit students who have engaged with them throughout the research and application process. In this way, institutions know who is a serious applicant and which students are most likely to attend their school if admitted. This improves the '**yield rate**' of an institution - a key metric for an institution (explained in greater detail in the chapter).

Therefore, one of the best things students can do is to find ways to **demonstrate their genuine interest** each of the institutions on their list. Here are a couple of articles on some very simple ways to boost the IQ (Interest Quotient):

[7 Ways to Show Demonstrated Interest](#) | [How to Demonstrate Interest in a College](#)

As always, the ISD counsellors welcome your questions and would be happy to meet with you to discuss what you can do to strengthen your application.

Yours faithfully,

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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 freshmen and transfer classes 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. The importance of various factors in the admission decision also differ depending on a student's designation as a first-time freshman, transfer, or international student. While first-time freshmen and international students had similarities in regard to top admission factors, top factors for transfer students were considerably different. Institutional characteristics, such

as enrollment size and acceptance rate, also impact the importance of admission factors.

Factors in the Admission Decision: First-Time Freshmen, 2017 (see Table 7)

- Grades in high school have been among the top decision factors for first-time freshmen for decades. Eighty-one percent of colleges rated grades in all courses as considerably important, and 71 percent rated grades in college prep courses as considerably important. Admission test scores and strength of curriculum were also rated considerably important by more than half of colleges (52 and 51 percent, respectively).
- A second set of factors were most often considered to be moderately important. These factors tend to provide insight regarding personal qualities and interest of students, as well as more details regarding 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, on average, moderate or considerable importance by a small percentage of institutions, likely because they are relevant only to a small subset of colleges. These factors included subject test scores (AP, IB), portfolios, SAT II scores, interviews, state graduation exam scores, and work experience.

Factors in the Admission Decision: International Students, 2017 (see Table 8)

- The top factors in admission decisions for first-time international students applying to four-year US colleges were similar to those of first-time domestic students, with the important exception of English proficiency exam scores.

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 | 173 | 80.9 | 10.4 | 5.8 | 2.9 |
| Grades in College Prep Courses | 171 | 70.8 | 17.5 | 8.8 | 2.9 |
| Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT) | 172 | 52.3 | 30.8 | 14.5 | 2.3 |
| Strength of Curriculum | 170 | 51.2 | 29.4 | 12.9 | 6.5 |
| Essay or Writing Sample | 168 | 16.7 | 36.9 | 20.8 | 25.6 |
| Counselor Recommendation | 167 | 10.8 | 46.1 | 28.7 | 14.4 |
| Student's Demonstrated Interest | 168 | 15.5 | 21.4 | 34.5 | 28.6 |
| Teacher Recommendation | 168 | 7.1 | 46.4 | 29.2 | 17.3 |
| Class Rank | 172 | 9.3 | 27.9 | 36.0 | 26.7 |
| Extracurricular Activities | 169 | 3.6 | 34.9 | 40.8 | 20.7 |
| Subject Test Scores (AP, IB) | 166 | 4.2 | 28.9 | 28.3 | 38.6 |
| Portfolio | 167 | 5.4 | 7.2 | 27.5 | 59.9 |
| Interview | 168 | 3.6 | 14.3 | 29.2 | 53.0 |
| Work | 169 | 1.8 | 17.8 | 41.4 | 39.1 |
| SAT II Scores | 166 | 6.6 | 3.0 | 19.9 | 70.5 |
| State Graduation Exam Scores | 168 | 1.8 | 8.3 | 17.9 | 72.0 |

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

Eighty percent of colleges rated these proficiency scores as considerably important, followed by grades in all courses (76 percent), grades in college prep courses (67 percent), and strength of curriculum (48 percent).

- A national school leaving or graduation certificate was also an important factor for international students, rated as considerably important by 35 percent of institutions and as moderately important by an additional 28 percent.

Factors in the Admission Decision: Transfer Students, 2017 (see Table 9)

- The factors considered in transfer admission decisions are notably different than those for first-time domestic and international students. The only two factors that are rated as considerably important by a majority of colleges were overall GPA at prior postsecondary institutions (83 percent) and average grades in transferable courses (72 percent). Unlike other prospective student populations, these factors serve as direct evidence of a student's

ability to succeed in college-level academic coursework.

- For transfer students, many factors related to high school performance fall to the level of moderate to limited importance, including grades, strength of the high school curriculum, and recommendations from teachers and counselors.
- In contrast to first-time prospective students, 74 percent of colleges rated admission test scores (SAT, ACT) as having limited or no importance in transfer admission decisions.

TABLE 8. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN), FALL 2017

| Factor | N | Considerable Importance | Moderate Importance | Limited Importance | No Importance |
|--|-----|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| English proficiency exam scores | 162 | 80.2 | 14.8 | 1.9 | 3.1 |
| Grades in All Courses | 166 | 75.9 | 13.9 | 7.2 | 3.0 |
| Grades in College Prep Courses | 165 | 67.3 | 18.2 | 9.7 | 4.8 |
| Strength of Curriculum | 164 | 48.2 | 28.7 | 13.4 | 9.8 |
| Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT) | 165 | 39.4 | 31.5 | 21.8 | 7.3 |
| National school-leaving certificate (non U.S.) | 151 | 35.1 | 27.8 | 14.6 | 22.5 |
| Essay or Writing Sample | 162 | 20.4 | 39.5 | 17.3 | 22.8 |
| Counselor Recommendation | 161 | 12.4 | 41.0 | 28.0 | 18.6 |
| Student's Demonstrated Interest | 161 | 16.8 | 23.0 | 31.7 | 28.6 |
| Teacher Recommendation | 162 | 10.5 | 43.8 | 25.3 | 20.4 |
| Class Rank | 165 | 9.7 | 17.6 | 32.1 | 40.6 |
| Extracurricular Activities | 163 | 1.8 | 31.3 | 42.3 | 24.5 |
| Subject Test Scores (AP, IB) | 159 | 7.5 | 22.6 | 28.9 | 40.9 |
| Portfolio | 161 | 5.0 | 6.8 | 31.1 | 57.1 |
| Interview | 161 | 2.5 | 18.0 | 31.1 | 48.4 |
| Work | 162 | 1.2 | 13.6 | 38.3 | 46.9 |
| SAT II Scores | 160 | 6.3 | 2.5 | 20.6 | 70.6 |
| State Graduation Exam Scores | 159 | 4.4 | 6.9 | 12.6 | 76.1 |

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen: Change Over Time

Because NACAC only recently began to collect annual data from transfer and international students, change in admission factor importance over time is limited to first-time freshmen. 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, interviews, and the essay/writing sample (see Table 10).

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 by strength of curriculum and grades in all courses (overall GPA). However, from 2014 to 2017, the percentage of colleges rating grades in all

courses as considerably important has increased from 60 percent to 81 percent. During the same time frame, grades in college prep courses decreased from 77 percent to 71 percent, and strength of curriculum from 60 percent to 51 percent.

This recent change in the relative order of overall GPA, grades in college prep courses, and strength of curriculum could be due to increases in the proportion of students who take college prep courses, such as AP

TABLE 9. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: TRANSFER STUDENTS, FALL 2017

| Factor | N | Considerable Importance | Moderate Importance | Limited Importance | No Importance |
|--|-----|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Overall GPA at prior institution | 166 | 82.5 | 13.3 | 3.0 | 1.2 |
| Average of grades in transferable courses | 164 | 72.0 | 17.7 | 4.9 | 5.5 |
| Grades in All Courses | 167 | 16.2 | 29.3 | 38.9 | 15.6 |
| Grades in College Prep Courses | 168 | 11.9 | 29.2 | 41.7 | 17.3 |
| Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT) | 167 | 9.6 | 16.8 | 44.9 | 28.7 |
| Strength of Curriculum | 166 | 12.0 | 23.5 | 40.4 | 24.1 |
| Essay or Writing Sample | 164 | 10.4 | 31.1 | 24.4 | 34.1 |
| Counselor Recommendation | 163 | 5.5 | 22.1 | 35.0 | 37.4 |
| Student's Demonstrated Interest | 165 | 13.3 | 23.0 | 32.1 | 31.5 |
| Teacher Recommendation | 164 | 4.9 | 30.5 | 31.7 | 32.9 |
| Class Rank | 167 | 3.0 | 9.6 | 29.3 | 58.1 |
| Extracurricular Activities | 165 | 1.2 | 24.8 | 40.0 | 33.9 |
| Subject Test Scores (AP, IB) | 162 | — | 13.6 | 34.0 | 52.5 |
| Portfolio | 163 | 4.9 | 6.1 | 25.2 | 63.8 |
| Interview | 164 | 2.4 | 11.6 | 31.1 | 54.9 |
| Work | 165 | 1.8 | 15.8 | 39.4 | 43.0 |
| SAT II Scores | 162 | 1.9 | 2.5 | 15.4 | 80.2 |
| State Graduation Exam Scores | 163 | — | 3.1 | 16.0 | 81.0 |
| Articulation with prior postsecondary institutions | 163 | 20.9 | 32.5 | 19.6 | 27.0 |
| Quality of prior postsecondary institution | 164 | 13.4 | 28.7 | 31.7 | 26.2 |
| English proficiency exam scores | 150 | 6.0 | 16.7 | 12.7 | 64.7 |
| National school-leaving certificate (non US) | 143 | 4.2 | 6.3 | 8.4 | 81.1 |

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

and dual enrollment. In analyzing this data, however, it is important to focus on the long-term trends for each factor rather than any year-to-year changes, as such differences may be due to variations in the annual survey samples. Additional years of data will be needed to determine if this change becomes a longer-term trend.

Factors in Admission by Institutional Characteristics for First-Time Freshmen, Transfer, and International Students, 2017

This section highlights differences in the level of importance attributed to admission factors based on institutional characteristics. The

results presented below are limited to admission factors for prospective first-time freshmen. Lack of variation for transfer and international admission factor ratings prohibited analysis for these groups.

The top four admission decision factors for first-time freshmen are consistent across all types of institutions. However, institutional

TABLE 10. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING “CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE” TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2007 TO FALL 2017

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

—Data are not available.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Surveys, 2007–08 through 2017–18.

characteristics determined the relative level of importance assigned to some admission factors.

Institutional Control

- For each prospective student population, private colleges placed relatively more importance
- For first-time freshmen, public colleges valued admission test
- For transfer applicants, public colleges attributed more importance to the quality of prior postsecondary institution(s).

on the essay/writing sample, the interview, counselor and teacher/professor recommendations, demonstrated interest, and extracurricular activities.

scores more highly than private institutions.

TABLE 11. PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INFLUENCE TO STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FALL 2017

| | N | Considerable Influence | Moderate Influence | Limited Influence | No Influence |
|---|-----|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <i>FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN</i> | | | | | |
| High School Attended | 166 | 3.6 | 18.1 | 36.7 | 41.6 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 169 | 2.4 | 13.0 | 20.7 | 63.9 |
| State or County of Residence | 165 | 1.2 | 7.9 | 23.6 | 67.3 |
| First-generation Status | 167 | 4.2 | 12.6 | 32.3 | 50.9 |
| Ability to Pay | 168 | 1.2 | 4.2 | 13.7 | 81.0 |
| Gender | 168 | 1.8 | 3.0 | 17.9 | 77.4 |
| Alumni Relations | 168 | 1.2 | 11.3 | 38.1 | 49.4 |
| <i>TRANSFER STUDENTS</i> | | | | | |
| High School Attended | 162 | 2.5 | 6.8 | 27.8 | 63.0 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 164 | 1.2 | 11.0 | 20.7 | 67.1 |
| State or County of Residence | 161 | 1.9 | 5.6 | 20.5 | 72.0 |
| First-generation Status | 162 | 3.1 | 10.5 | 30.2 | 56.2 |
| Ability to Pay | 164 | 1.8 | 4.9 | 12.8 | 80.5 |
| Gender | 164 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 14.6 | 81.1 |
| Alumni Relations | 164 | 1.2 | 11.6 | 36.0 | 51.2 |
| <i>INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN)</i> | | | | | |
| High School Attended | 161 | 4.3 | 17.4 | 31.7 | 46.6 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 163 | 1.2 | 8.0 | 17.2 | 73.6 |
| State or County of Residence | 161 | 1.9 | 11.2 | 24.8 | 62.1 |
| First-generation Status | 161 | 3.1 | 9.3 | 28.0 | 59.6 |
| Ability to Pay | 163 | 20.2 | 16.6 | 9.8 | 53.4 |
| Gender | 163 | 1.8 | 2.5 | 16.0 | 79.8 |
| Alumni Relations | 163 | 1.8 | 12.3 | 36.8 | 49.1 |

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

Enrollment

- Smaller colleges rated the interview, teacher/professor recommendations, and demonstrated interest more highly for each applicant group.
- For both domestic and international first-time freshmen applicants, smaller colleges gave more weight to total high school GPA and work in comparison to their larger counterparts.
- Grades in college prep courses and counselor recommendations were rated more highly by smaller colleges only for domestic first-time freshmen applicants.

Selectivity

- When evaluating applications from each student group, institutions that were more selective placed more emphasis on the essay, interview, and extracurricular activities.
- For both domestic and international first-time freshmen applicants, more selective colleges rated strength of curriculum and recommendations from counselors and teachers more highly.
- Grades in college prep courses and counselor recommendations were given more weight by selective colleges for domestic first-time freshmen only.

(See Appendix Table B.4. – B.6. for a correlation matrix of statistically significant associations.)

Student Characteristics as Contextual Factors in Admission Decisions for First-Time Freshmen, Transfer, and International Students, 2017

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 very little importance to these characteristics, there are some findings worth noting (see Table 11).

For example, 22 percent of colleges rated the high school attended as at least moderately important in first-time freshmen admission decisions. Alumni relations was attributed some (at least limited) level of influence by 51 percent of colleges in admission decisions for both domestic and international first-time freshmen, and by 49 percent of colleges for transfer admission decisions. For international students, ability to pay was rated as a considerable influence at 20 percent of colleges, compared to only 1 percent for domestic freshmen and 2 percent for transfer students.

Interesting differences also were found in the relative importance given to these factors based on institution type. Data provided on the NACAC 2017–18 Admission Trends Survey allowed for comparison by institutional characteristics for each prospective student group—first-time freshmen, transfer students, and international students.

Institutional Control

- Private institutions gave more weight to race/ethnicity, gender, high school attended, and alumni relations when evaluating the applications of each student group.
- Private colleges gave greater consideration to ability to pay when evaluating first-time freshmen and transfer students.

Enrollment

- For all three prospective student groups, alumni relations was rated as having more influence in admission decisions for smaller colleges. For both first-time freshmen and transfer students, ability to pay was more influential at smaller colleges.

- Larger colleges gave more weight to state, county, or country of residence for all three applicant groups.

Selectivity

- When evaluating applications from each student group, institutions that were more selective placed more emphasis on race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, state/county/country of residence, and high school attended.
- For transfer students, ability to pay was given more consideration by institutions with a more selective admission process.

(See Appendix Tables B.7. – B.9. for complete correlation matrices of statistically significant associations.)