

## What Do College Admissions Look For?

### **It's not all test scores and report cards anymore. Admissions offices are looking for students who stand out from the crowd. Here's how to do it.**

Before you or your student begin worrying over perfect report cards or sky high test results, you should realize that college admissions offices take a wide variety of factors into consideration when deciding on acceptance.

Some you know... but might not understand the importance of. Others you may have not even thought about.

Here's a brief look at some of those criteria and how you can assure your child's making the most of their opportunities to stand out from the admissions pack.

- **Take harder classes, even if you don't do as well:** Many students shy away from AP classes because they're nervous about the effect it could have on their GPA. But loading up on easy classes to pad the report card with A's isn't the best choice. Many schools want to see students challenging themselves and progressing to higher levels rather than standing still and going for the automatic A. Some schools will even recalculate your GPA based on the number of advanced or AP classes taken.
- **Early college experience is a plus:** Some schools don't offer AP classes, so students inclined to up the level of their senior year course load should consider adding some community college courses to their resume. Says one admissions dean, *"From a dean of admissions' point of view, it is really cool to see kids step out of the norm... We like to see kids have some passion for learning. If the student maybe runs out of math classes in high school, and chooses to go to the community college for math classes, that's pretty impressive."*
- **Follow your passions:** When choosing extracurricular activities, a lot of students pick based on what they think an admissions dean is going to want to see. What they don't realize is that these deans have a keen eye for knowing what's real and what's for show. Students should follow their passions and do the activities they're really invested in. Four years in the juggling club might be a lot more intriguing to a school than a resume of 20 activities done for one year at a time, simply to get them listed on an application. If a student is their own person and does what truly interests them, schools will take notice.
- **Knock your essay out of the park:** Even with mediocre test scores and grades, a student can make a world of difference for their chances at a school with a well crafted essay. Too many times these are treated as an afterthought, but an admissions essay can really communicate a lot to a college. First, it can show off the kind of writing skills your child has, which deans love. Second it gives the student a chance to truly communicate who they are, what makes them unique and what sort of contribution they'll make to a school. An essay that stands out from the pack is a huge plus for a student who might not make the cut otherwise.
- **Spend your summer wisely:** If your child loves going to soccer camp or spending a month at the beach with cousins, it's probably best to get that out of the way in the summers following 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. After that, schools will look at how students spend their down time in the warmer months. A summer job on the other hand (especially ones that can extend into the school year without affecting grades) are looked on very

positively. "Real world experience" helps students with work ethic and time management – two hugely important things needed for a college career. Volunteer work is also a great resume builder. Whichever you choose, the last 2 summers before college should be viewed as opportunities, not breaks.

- **Nail the interview:** Depending on where your child is applying, an interview may be required. And even if it isn't, there's a good chance they'll meet with an admissions official at some point for a conversation. And while students won't know this yet, these meetings fall under the same code of conduct as a job interview. It's up to you to coach your student on the right things to do. Arrive on time. Dress nicely. Come prepared with questions. Be prepared for questions (practice beforehand!). Follow up with a handwritten thank you note. A great face-to-face impression is crucial in demonstrating the student's interest level in the school, their maturity and readiness to be a contributing member of the college.
- **Show Them You Want It:** I can't stress this enough. Colleges want to students who want to go to that school. "Demonstrated interest" is a term schools are using now to determine which students are truly serious about attending. If your child knows where they want to go, then it's essential they show the school that. You can show them this by making the time for a campus visit or tour on your own, outside of a general open house... Contacting the admissions office to ask questions and express interest (once or twice is enough though, don't overdo it). Responding quickly to recruiting material... And above all, applying early. This is a huge flashing sign to a college that you're excited about going there and want to lock down your spot right away.

So it's not all about good grades and test scores. Admissions is a wooing process, but the wooing needs to take place on both ends. Mutual interest must be established.

And don't think that deans can't see through a hollow application. Allow your student to be him or herself. Colleges love unique personalities who can offer something new to the school. Not cookie cutter trumped up resumes.

It's not all a numbers game anymore. Be prompt, be personable, be excited and be yourself.

That's what it takes to eventually be a student.