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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.)