



TEN MINUTE PROFESSOR

What Do Admissions Officers Actually Look For?

***What's the Trend?
Met Challenges?
Motivated?
Have a Passion?***

Ask any admissions officer what three elements are the most important in the admissions application -- and the answer will likely be: courses, courses and courses.

The admissions officer's job is to bring to campus those students that the faculty most want to teach. Although it doesn't always hold true, the consensus is that the best measure of a student's potential in college is his or her performance in the high school classroom.

The Transcript

Most students think their transcripts are not a true reflection of their abilities -- that transcripts are just pieces of paper that provide only one dimension of accomplishment. That's **not** what admissions officers think.

Most admissions officers read the transcript as a dynamic, multi-dimensional document. It speaks about your level of motivation: Have you challenged the available curriculum -- or taken the easiest path through school? Have you demonstrated range, depth and breadth in the courses you've taken? Is there evidence of a willingness to try new things?

Most importantly, is there a trend? Are you maturing, gaining strength in the upper grades -- or taking it easy knowing that you have already achieved a certain level of accomplishment? The transcript is like a relief map of your high school experience.

Test Scores

Test scores may cause the most anxiety for college applicants. More than a million students take the SAT or ACT every year as a requirement for college admission. Many students applying to more selective schools also take the SAT II exams (once called "Achievement Tests").

What do admissions officers look for in reading your test scores? Obviously, acceptable ranges vary from college to college. For the most part, though, test scores are just one



element of consideration -- often to raise questions or confirm the obvious.

When a student has high test scores but mediocre grades, it raises questions about motivation. Is the student bright but lazy? If so, the admissions office must be satisfied that there isn't an inherent poor work ethic that will prove an impediment to college achievement.

Conversely, the student with very high grades and low test scores raises questions. How does this school compare to other schools that applicants attend? Is there grade inflation at the school? How demanding was the course load? Is there a language barrier or a learning disability?

Your test scores are a clue to interpreting your transcript.

The Personal Essay

The personal essay allows each applicant a terrific opportunity to help admissions officers read the map more accurately. In addition to articulating your goals, dreams and expectations, you can also explain any gaps or changes in your record. The essay is your chance to take some control in the admissions process -- to thoughtfully and persuasively make your own case.

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Admissions officers certainly look for writing ability. But, they also look for originality and logic. They want to gain a fuller sense of your abilities and aspirations. The most effective essays convey an "authentic voice" -- something not easily explained that admissions officers appreciate and recognize easily.

The authentic voice doesn't come from trying to satisfy the reader. Nor is it an essay carefully screened by your counselors or parents. It comes through when students convey a true essence of personality and give the reader a deeper understanding of their individual strengths.

Extracurricular Activities

Most applications ask you to list your accomplishments and extracurricular activities. Some students obsess about these -- and join lots of activities, especially in their senior year. According to admissions officers, such students are missing the point. Trying to improve "the look" of your application this way screams of superficiality!

Colleges are more interested in a sustained involvement borne from your true interests. A person with a singular interest, pursued with passion, is far more appealing than one who touches lightly on many activities.

Recommendations

For recommendations, colleges want to hear from a few people who know you well and can write convincingly about your abilities -- not a long list of important people with whom you've had limited interaction. You need not be described as a paragon of virtue or the next Nobel Prize winner. A compelling recommendation may come from a teacher who gave you a "B" but speaks of your determination and tenacity in pursuing a subject that does not come easily to you.

A Final Point

Most institutions are looking for a reason to admit you -- not keep you out. View the application, transcript, recommendations and personal essay as instruments over which you have control -- and use them to build a clear and convincing argument.



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