

The comments below are by Joseph Allen Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA (2000). They are valuable incite into what Admissions Officers consider in college applications.

COLLEGE ADMISSION

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 the campus those students our faculty most want to teach. Although it certainly does not always hold true, the best measure of a student's potential in colleges is his or her performance in the high school classroom.

The Transcript

We often hear students say their transcripts are not a true reflection of their abilities; that they are just pieces of paper that provide only one dimension of accomplishment. That's not what we see.

Most admissions officers read the transcript as a dynamic, multi-dimensional document. It speaks to us 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? Perhaps, most importantly, we gain a sense of trend. Are you maturing, gaining strength in the upper grades or taking it easy knowing you have already achieved a certain level of accomplishment. We read the transcript like a relief map of your high school experience.

Test Scores

Test scores may cause the most anxiety for college applicants. Over one million students take the SAT or ACT every year as a requirement for college admission. Many applying to more selective schools also take the SAT II, formerly the Achievement Tests.

What do admissions officers look for in reading your test scores?

Obviously, acceptable ranges vary from college to college. But, for the most part, test scores are used as one element of consideration, often to raise questions or to confirm the obvious. A student with very high test scores (more than a 1400 combines SAT score, for example), but mediocre grades, can raise questions about motivation. Is the student bright, but lazy? Regardless of the reason for this student's relatively poor classroom performance in high school, the admissions officer must be satisfied that it will not be an impediment in college. Conversely, the student with very high grades and low test scores raises a different set of questions. How demanding was the courseload? Is there evidence of grade inflation at the school? What about a language barrier or learning disability?

A student's test scores give us another clue to interpreting the overall record; another way to add dimension and detail to the map your transcript represents.

The Essay or Personal Statement

The personal essay allows each applicant a way to help us read the map more accurately. In addition to telling us your goals, dreams, and expectations of college, you can also explain any gaps or changes in your record. The essay is your chance to take some control in the admission process, to thoughtfully and persuasively make your own case.

We look for writing ability, certainly. But we also look for originality and logic, hoping to gain a fuller sense of your abilities and aspirations. The most effective essays convey an "authentic voice," something not easily explained, but something that admissions officers appreciate and recognize readily. The authentic voice doesn't come from a student trying to satisfy the reader and it's not in an essay that has been carefully screened by counselors and parents. It comes through when the student conveys a true essence of personality and gives the reader a deeper understanding of his or her individual strengths.

Extracurricular Activities

Most applications ask you to list your accomplishments and extracurricular activities. Some students obsess about these and join every activity in their senior year. These students are missing the point. The last reason to do these things is to improve "the look" of your application. That screams of superficiality. We are more interested in a depth of 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.

Recommendations

For recommendations, we 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, nor 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. If you see the application, transcript, recommendations, and personal as instruments over which you have control, you can use them to build a clear and convincing argument.