

Chapter 2:

Navigating the Admissions Process

No matter how well prepared a student might be academically, the college application process can seem intimidating and confusing. This chapter will help you guide the student through the process and explain many of the common terms students will encounter along the way.

How Do Schools Decide Which Students to Admit?

Colleges and universities consider a variety of factors when making admissions decisions. Below are some of the criteria a school might use. This list is in no way complete, nor is it arranged in order of importance.

Academic Preparation

- academic honors and awards
- class rank
- course difficulty
- courses available at the student's school
- courses taken
- grade point average
- grades

Application Items

- admissions test scores
- application essay
- interview
- recommendations

Non-Academic Activities & Characteristics

- ability to pay
- community involvement
- ethnicity
- extracurricular activities
- honors and awards
- special skills or talents

Few students score well in every area. Make sure students know that weakness in one area can be balanced out by excellence in another.

Admissions Selectivity

Students can get an idea of how selective a college’s admissions process is by the type of school they are considering.

Admission policy	Type of school	Typical ACT composite score	Typical SAT I combined score
Open - All high school graduates are accepted until the school's enrollment capacity is reached.	All public two-year community and technical colleges and some private career schools in Minnesota.	None Required	None Required
Liberal - While most two-year colleges will accept any student with a high school diploma (or GED), some popular or difficult programs within those colleges are more selective.	Some public two-year community and technical colleges and some private career schools in Minnesota.	18 or higher	1290 or higher
Traditional - The majority of freshmen accepted are in the top 50 percent of their high school graduating class.	Most public universities and some private colleges and universities.	21 or higher	1470 or higher
Selective - The majority of freshmen accepted are in the top 25 percent of their high school graduating class.	Some public colleges and universities and some private colleges and universities. Some specific programs at schools.	24 or higher	1650 or higher
Highly selective - The majority of freshmen accepted are in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class.	Elite private colleges and universities.	27 or higher	1820 or higher

Highest score possible is a 36.

Highest score possible is a 2400.

Some students who do not meet the college entrance exam requirements may be admitted. Students should be encouraged to talk with the admissions office of the colleges they want to attend to learn more about specific admissions requirements and exception policies.

A handout of this page is available in **Appendix B**.

Admissions Deadlines

Admission deadlines also vary from school to school. Typically, schools post a deadline for submitting applications and, on a set date, students are notified whether they have been accepted. Students must then notify the school of their intention to enroll at that school, often by May 1.

In an attempt to attract more students, many colleges and universities have added several alternatives to their regular admission deadlines:

Admission Option	Application Deadline	Approximate Acceptance Notification Date	Comments
Regular Decision	In the winter of senior year	Usually by May 1	Students submit by a specific date and receive a decision within a clearly stated period of time. The student may apply to other schools at the same time without restriction.
Early Decision	In the fall of senior year	Before December	Excellent plan if the student has a school that is a clear favorite. However, if accepted, the student is committed to attending that school. He or she agrees to not submit any other applications until either being accepted or declined by the college. This also means that if the student expects to receive financial aid, he or she will not be able to compare financial aid packages from different schools.
Early Action	In the fall of senior year	Before December	Similar to the Early Decision plan except that it does not require students to commit to attending the school in advance if accepted.
Restrictive Early Action	In the fall of senior year	Before December	Same as Early Action, except the school places restrictions on the student's application to early admission plans at other schools.
Rolling Admission	Until the enrollment capacity is filled or the school year begins	Usually within 2 - 3 weeks	These schools accept applications anytime during the application period, and decisions are made as soon as the application is received. The earlier a student applies, the earlier he or she can secure a slot in the freshman class. As the slots fill, the competition for the remaining slots increases.
Open Admission	Until the enrollment capacity is filled or the school year begins	Usually within 2 - 3 weeks	These schools admit most students with a high school diploma or GED without regard to previous academic performance, grades or GPA. Most entering students take placement tests after acceptance to identify the appropriate level of coursework. Some programs may have more stringent admissions requirements. Students are accepted until the school reaches its enrollment capacity.

What Students Will Need to Apply

When applying for admission to a college, students will need to pull a lot of pieces together:

- **High school transcript** and college transcripts (if the student earned college credit while in high school).
- **Application fee** for each school. Some schools don't charge an application fee. Others may be able to waive the fee if the student can't afford to pay it.
- **College admissions test scores**, like the ACT or SAT, are required by most four-year colleges or universities. Students should take these tests in the spring of their junior year and/or the fall of their senior year.
- **Letters of recommendations** are required by most private four-year colleges and universities, and can come from teachers, coaches, mentors, church leaders, employers and others who have experience working with the applicant as a student, volunteer or employee. Recommendations written by relatives are not acceptable.
- **Application essays** are required by most private four-year colleges or universities, and help the school get acquainted with students through their own words.
- **Interviews** may be required by selective private four-year colleges or universities.

Encourage your students to submit multiple applications. They should apply to six schools or programs, two in each the following:

- **Safety schools** at which they're sure to be accepted
- **Good match schools** at which they're likely to be accepted
- **Reach schools** at which their acceptance is not as likely

Types of Admissions Applications

In addition to the above items, students will need to submit an admissions application to each school. Most applications are submitted online. There are three general types:

School Application: An application for a specific school that can be used only at that school.

System Application: An application that can be used at all the schools within a college system, such as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system.

Common Application: An application distributed by the National Association of Secondary Principals (www.commonapp.org) accepted by most private colleges.

College Admissions Tests

Each year, more than a million high school students nationwide apply to postsecondary institutions. Trying to evaluate the relative abilities of these students is difficult because high schools have wide variations in grading systems, curricula and student populations.

That's why most four-year colleges and universities rely, in part, on standardized tests to compare the educational aptitude and achievements of potential students.

The standardized tests accepted by the majority of colleges are the ACT (www.act.org) and the SAT I (www.collegeboard.com). Many colleges accept both; but some accept only one. Make sure students know which test is required for admission. The SAT I is preferred by most schools on the east and west coasts while the ACT is accepted most widely in the Midwest and south central portion of the United States. Exam fees for both tests may be waived for needy students. The TOEFL (www.toefl.org) maybe required for students whose native language is not English.

Name	Tests	Fee	Length
ACT	English, reading, math and science reasoning skills. Optional writing test.	\$32 + \$15 for writing test	3 hrs. 25 min.*
SAT I	Critical reading and math reasoning abilities and writing skills.	\$45	3 hrs. 45 min.
SAT II	Specific subject area, often related to a specific area of study.	\$29 - \$40	1 hr.
TOEFL	Ability of nonnative speakers of English to understand and use North American English. The internet-based test is the most common in the United States, but a few locations still offer the paper-based test.	\$150	<u>Internet</u> : 4 hrs. 30 min. <u>Paper</u> : 3 hrs. 30 min.

* with writing test

2009 ACT average composite scores for states with 50% or more of high school graduates tested

State	Composite Score	% of High School Graduates Taking Test
Minnesota	22.7	68%
Iowa	22.4	59%
Wisconsin	22.3	67%
Nebraska	22.1	72%
South Dakota	22.0	74%
Montana	22.0	54%
Kansas	21.9	74%
Utah	21.8	68%
National	21.1	45%

2009 SAT I mean verbal and math scores for states with 10% or less of high school graduates tested

State	Verbal Mean	Math Mean	Writing Mean	% of High School Graduates Taking Test
Minnesota	595	609	578	7%
Illinois	588	604	583	6%
Wisconsin	594	608	582	5%
Missouri	595	600	584	5%
Michigan	584	603	575	5%
Iowa	610	615	588	3%
South Dakota	589	600	569	3%
North Dakota	590	593	566	3%
National	501	515	493	46%

2009 – 2010 Test Dates

Test	Test Date	Registration Deadline
ACT	September 12, 2009	August 7, 2009
	October 24, 2009	September 18, 2009
	December 12, 2009	November 6, 2009
	February 6, 2010	January 5, 2010
	April 10, 2010	March 5, 2010
	June 12, 2010	May 7, 2010
TOEFL	Test dates vary by location. For more information, visit www.toefl.org .	
SAT I	October 10, 2009	September 9, 2009
	November 7, 2009	October 1, 2009
	December 5, 2009	October 30, 2009
	January 23, 2010	December 15, 2009
	March 13, 2010	February 4, 2010
	May 1, 2010	March 25, 2010
SAT II	June 5, 2010	April 29, 2010
	October 10, 2009	September 9, 2009
	November 7, 2009	October 1, 2009
	December 5, 2009	October 30, 2009
	January 23, 2010	December 15, 2009
	May 1, 2010	March 25, 2010
June 5, 2010	April 29, 2010	

Preliminary SAT (PSAT)

Students should take the PSAT no later than the fall of their junior year of high school. Like the SAT, the PSAT tests critical reading and math reasoning abilities as well as writing skills. The PSAT also serves as the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test if taken in the junior year. High schools are allowed to administer the test once a year, usually on the third Saturday in October or the preceding Wednesday. The test costs \$13 per student and lasts two hours and 10 minutes plus an additional 35 minutes for related activities. A limited number of fee waivers are available on a first-come, first-served basis for eligible students in eleventh grade who meet USDA Income Eligibility Guidelines. Visit professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/psat/ for more information.

Placement Tests

Although few two-year colleges and career schools require tests like the ACT or SAT, most do require the student to take at least one placement test after the student has been admitted to the school or program. Such tests assess the student's knowledge and skill level, and allow the school to place the student in classes at the appropriate level or identify academic deficiencies. The most common tests are in reading, writing, English language proficiency and mathematics.

Common Tests

- **Accuplacer** (www.collegeboard.com/accuplacer/)
- **Academic Skills Assessment Program, or ASAP**
- **Career Programs Assessment test, or CAPt** (www.act.org/cpat/)
- **Computerized Academic Placement Program, or CAPP**
- **COMPASS/ESL** (www.act.org/compass/)
- **Wonderlic** (www.wonderlic.com)

Application Essays

Private four-year colleges and universities often require application essays (or personal statements) to discover what makes the student unique. Students should give themselves plenty of time to think about, write and edit their essays. With careful planning and revising, students may be able to use an essay more than once. Essays are not easy, but students should be reminded that the essay is not a test.

Whenever possible, enlist the aid of English teachers to include college essay writing in their curriculum. A classroom assignment is an excellent opportunity to have peers and adults read the essay to make sure it makes sense and conveys the student's personality. Teachers and counselors can help proofread the essay for structure, grammar and spelling.

Essay Topics

Sometimes, essay topics are provided. Other times, the student will need to choose from a list of topics. The following are some good essay topics:

- An academic subject that excites and motivates the student
- Hobbies or out-of-classroom activities that are of special interest to the student
- A local or national event that has touched the student in some way
- A personal event that has shaped or molded the student's experience
- A social cause about which the student is passionate

Effective Essays

Some of the most effective application essays accomplish one or more of the following:

The essay reveals the personality of the student such as their humor, beliefs and values, work ethic or commitments. This helps admissions counselors learn about students beyond their transcripts, GPA and test scores. When using humor, student should have several people read the essay to make sure the humor is appropriate.

The essay demonstrates the student's writing and communication skills. These skills are an essential factor in a student's success in postsecondary education. It also can help showcase a student's creativity or organizational and analytical skills.

The essay shows that the student is a hard worker. Common topics for this type of essay include the student's first job, how he found mentors or how he overcame an obstacle. It can reveal student initiative, responsibility and resilience.

The essay explains how the student's grades improved. Students should only write about a grade-turnaround if the outcome is positive.

A handout on writing essays is available in **Appendix B**.

Admissions Interviews

Selective private four-year colleges and universities often encourage prospective students to complete an interview as part of the admissions process. Some schools require the interview, while it is optional for others. Generally, interviews take place on campus with an admissions counselor. However, some schools may have alumni representatives available to interview prospective students locally if the student is unable to travel to the school.

Letters of Recommendation

Admissions counselors at four-year schools rely on letters of recommendation from teachers and counselors when evaluating a student's application. These recommendations provide:

- A context in which to evaluate a student's academic preparation
- A cross-reference for verifying a student's strengths and current limitations
- Additional insights into a student's character and potential to thrive at the school

Each letter of recommendation should be individualized, accurate and truthful. While you should always advocate for the student, keep in mind that references containing only glowing support for a student may be discounted. Recommendation letters should be kept to one page.

Remind the student to allow people plenty of time to write recommendations. Encourage them to send each a thank you note.

Counselor Recommendations

An effective counselor recommendation includes a school and student profile. The **school profile** helps the admissions office understand your school and includes:

- Name and address of the school
- Name and telephone number of the counselor
- Number of students
- Grading scale
- The size of the previous year's graduating class
- Number of students from the previous year's graduating class who attended postsecondary schools
- Counselor's signature

This school profile also should contain a section about the student as it relates to your school's demographics:

- Name of the student
- Ranking and percentile in the class
- Grade point average
- Difficulty of student's course selection

To help you identify an appropriate topic for the recommendation, ask the student to respond (verbally or in writing) to the following questions:

- What do you find difficult or challenging in school? What is easy?
- What do you think is the best measure of your potential success at college?
- Has anything affected your academic performance? If so, what?
- Are you proud of any personal accomplishment?
- What do you like to read or do in your spare time?
- What five adjectives would you use to describe yourself?

When writing a recommendation for a student, keep in mind each of the following:

- Remain objective. The best recommendations present information in a passionate way, but try to avoid becoming too subjective.
- Make every student profile unique by talking with the student to gain information and inspiration. Generic letters and cliché phrases should be avoided.
- Keep your writing brief and to the point. A clean and concise recommendation is better than a long letter using flowery language.
- Use present voice and active verbs whenever possible, especially since the student has not yet graduated.
- Focus on one or two specific activities or anecdotes that illustrate an important aspect of the student's character. Avoid long lists of any type.
- Check for "red flags" in the student's record or anything you would question if you were a college admissions counselor.

Teacher Recommendations

The recommendations made by a teacher who works with the student on a day-to-day basis can be very influential, and should:

- Explain how the teacher knows the student
- Describe what the student has accomplished and the skills he or she has developed
- Be specific and include examples whenever possible
- Focus solely on the student's work, performance or behavior within the teacher's class
- Temper less complimentary comments with positives comments

Encourage teachers to ask the student for additional insights for their recommendations.