

What Colleges are Looking For

Sometimes it seems like a mystery. Every college has its own criteria and defines a set of parameters used to evaluate applicants. But what we can tell you is that it will almost certainly be some mix of the following, weighted a bit differently from college to college:

- *Academic Record – GPA, class rank, consistency, improvement, difficulty of classes, reputation of high school. In short, a strong level of performance in a challenging curriculum represents the ideal mix.*

- *Testing – Standardized tests will be a part of the application at almost every college.*

- *Extracurricular Activities – These seem to be weighted more heavily at private schools but are probably important almost everywhere. There is some bias toward academically-based activities versus social, such as yearbook versus spirit club.*

- *Letters of Recommendation – These serve to paint a broader, more subjective picture of the student and are important when colleges ask for them. Some public schools will not take them, so do your research. Don't send them if the colleges don't want them.*

- *Honors and Awards - Special recognition for some skill or talent is desirable and you will want to showcase any that you receive.*

- *Essays – Most applications will have an essay section, and it is becoming increasingly important as more and more students look alike in other ways. The essay seems to be getting more attention as a differentiator, especially as interviews become less common.*

- *Interviews – While not always offered, they are just another way to gain insight into the applicant, and you should obtain them whenever possible.*

- *Personality? Believe it or not, the newest things we've seen are assessments designed to measure non-cognitive traits such as leadership, creativity and resilience. While not yet mainstream, we may see this type of evaluation become more common.*

It is important to remember that admissions committees are not only admitting qualified individuals, but are also building dynamic and diverse classes. This explains why a seemingly less qualified student might occasionally be accepted over another.