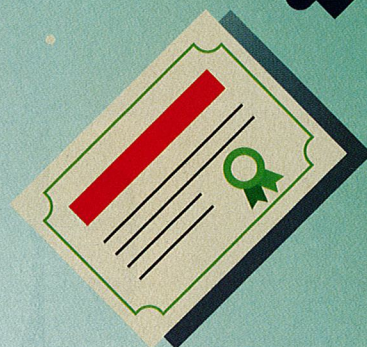






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Debunking **6** Myths About Admissions

Get a feel for how much grades, tests and your résumé really matter from those who review the applications

by **Stacey Colino**

WHEN APPLYING TO COLLEGE, many students think they know which strategies will help them attract the attention (in a good way) of admission officers. But there's often a gap between perception and reality about what actually matters – and what matters most – when it comes to grades, test scores, extracurricular activities and other factors. And what holds true in this unprecedented time will differ in some ways from the norm. Many colleges report that they take a multifaceted approach to reviewing applicants, factoring in grades and scores on the SAT or ACT, but also aiming “to evaluate them beyond what is seen on a transcript,” says Joe Shields, an admissions counselor at Goucher College in Baltimore. “A holistic admissions review process allows a student to demonstrate their best qualities and discuss how they would be a good fit for that college.”

Another promising and often misunderstood fact: It's not as difficult

as many students think to get admitted to a college, beyond the most selective schools. On average, two-thirds of first-time, freshman applicants were offered admission to a four-year school in the U.S., according to a 2019 report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Some 80% of places accepted 50% or more. “There are many good colleges you may not have heard of,” says Hannah Serota, founder and CEO of Creative College Connections, a consulting practice that's dedicated to helping applicants find the right fit. Read on for a look at several other persistent myths about admissions:

#1 MYTH

Getting all A's is the most important thing.

OF COURSE, YOUR GRADES MATTER. But what that means depends on a given college's level of selectivity as well as the classes you took, based on the offerings at your high school. After all, some places offer more honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses than others, and an A in one of these more challenging courses can signify mastery of more rigorous content than an A in a grade-level class at a school that offers both. College admissions officers are often well aware of how different high school curricula are because they work with many of the same schools every year and receive detailed profiles of the course offerings, along with context about the student body. "GPAs can present very differently from each institution to the next," says Janine Bissic, former director of admission at Whittier College in California.

Spring semester junior year grades are typically a crucial



metric, but this cycle will be different, thanks to the varied experiences students have had studying from home during the pandemic. Admissions officers say they'll be forgiving to those who didn't receive letter grades, for instance. Everyone evaluating applicants is in the same boat, says Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor for enrollment at the University of Denver. But expect fall of senior year to get a close look, along with your earlier performances.

At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, "we would expect the most rigorous schedule that's appropriate for the student and the highest grades – we would be looking for both," says Douglas Christiansen, vice provost for university

enrollment affairs and dean of admissions and financial aid. Being able to handle a challenging course load while maintaining strong marks is a signal that you have the academic grit and discipline to succeed at college.

Balance is also key. Taking a handful of AP or advanced classes can help you look good, but more isn't always better; the idea is to take the most rigorous set of courses that makes sense given your abilities. While a B in an AP English lit class may be more impressive than an A in a grade-level English class, a C or D isn't likely to wow anyone. "Challenge yourself where you are strong, and then work hard and do well in all of your courses," says Clark Brigger, executive director of admissions at the University of Colorado–Boulder. Has the pandemic quashed your plans to take AP courses this semester? "If the school says, 'We're going to limit the AP classes,' then colleges are going to understand," says Serota.

"When a student takes a challenging course and does well, it is predictive of how they will perform in college," Brigger adds. "However, there are always some students who stretch too far and then struggle with their performance and subsequently their health." If your grades dropped during a semester when you had health problems or personal hardships (such as a parent's job loss or a serious illness or death in the family), it's wise to explain the reason somewhere in your application. If the issue is coronavirus-related, the Common App and Coalition Application have added optional special sections where applicants can elaborate.

But don't be discouraged if your grades aren't where you'd like them to be early in high school. Many admissions officers look for upward trends in grades, improvements over time that enable a student to finish strong. "At the end of the day, we want to feel confident that if we admit a student, they can handle the rigor of the courses here," says Yvonne Romero da Silva, vice president for enrollment at Rice University in Houston.

#2 MYTH

Your test scores can make or break your chances of getting in.

ON THE CONTRARY, THEY'RE JUST ONE element of the application package. "There are many students we've denied with perfect test scores because they didn't have anything else to set them apart," Christiansen says. Even in normal times, different institutions place varying levels of importance on standardized tests. This year, more than half of all colleges and universities, including Harvard and Yale, will be test-optional for fall 2021 admissions; in many cases, schools are extending this beyond next fall. The University of Maryland–College Park is one of many state flagships temporarily suspending their test requirements. The University of California system is test-optional for fall 2021 and 2022 entrants, and it will create its own test to use for admission on a trial basis.

Even before the pandemic, many schools were shifting



their test policies to optional, including Ohio Wesleyan University, the University of Denver and the University of Chicago. Bowdoin College in Maine has been test-optional for more than half a century. This trend is partly because admissions officers recognize that many applicants have intellectual abilities and academic strengths that aren't reflected in exam scores.

But before you decide to skip the tests, consider whether you'll be applying for scholarships, some of which depend on test scores to qualify applicants, and whether having good results might be beneficial even at a test-optional school. Colleges and universities publish the data related to the average test scores of their incoming classes online, so officials suggest that students can use that data to benchmark their own exam results and weigh whether it might enhance their application to submit scores.

Taking the SAT or ACT more than once generally improves scores, especially if the testing dates are spaced out appropriately (that is, by months, not weeks), because "the test scores are merely an assessment of a student's capabilities at the time of the assessment," Romero da Silva explains. For those who might have been nervous or encountered unfamiliar questions, deciding on a redo could be beneficial. Additional exposure to the test does generally improve a student's score, but typically not after two attempts, says Stacey Kostell, chief executive officer for the Coalition for College, a group of more than 150 colleges and universities

dedicated to increasing students' access to higher education.

Among colleges that do require the SAT or ACT, many will "superscore," which means they use your best section-level scores even if they're from different test dates. In other words, if your SAT reading score was 70 points higher the second time you took the test but your math score was 50 points higher on the first, you share the better of both attempts with the admissions office for review.

#3 MYTH

The more clubs and activities you have on your résumé, the better.

THE QUALITY OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT counts more than the quantity of your activities. "Being passionate about key interests is more important than joining a lot of clubs," says Christiansen. "We're looking for depth and progression of leadership, not just participation." David Senter of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, thinks his experience swimming competitively and working his way up to varsity team captain helped demonstrate his dedication and added something important to his strong academic record, along with his participation on the academic quiz bowl team. "You have to show you care," says

Senter, a 2020 Rice grad. "I was never the fastest, and I never went to the state championships, but I showed up every day and bonded with the team."

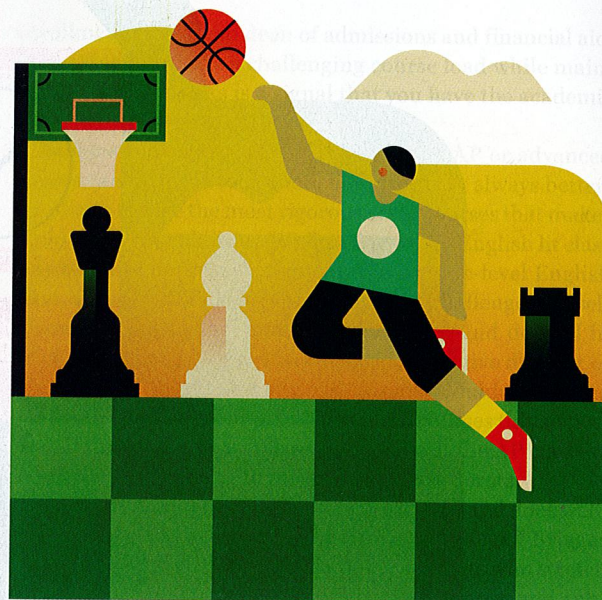
When reviewing extracurricular activities on an application, admissions officers really want to know things like: What did you do in high school that made whatever you participated in better and helped you grow? or What are you doing with your time that would contribute to our campus in a meaningful way if you came here? "Colleges are looking for a well-rounded student body, not necessarily a well-rounded student," says Serota.

These days, college admissions officers are also typically sensitive to the fact that some students don't have time for extracurricular activities. Rather, they might need to take care of younger siblings after school or hold a job. If that's the case, prospective students would do well to be honest about their situation and to focus on the qualities that emerge from those experiences and what they get out of them, Kostell says.

#4 MYTH

You should only ask for a recommendation from a teacher who gave you an A.

WRONG AGAIN. INSTEAD, IT'S BETTER to consider whether a teacher can help admissions officers get to know a different side of you and understand who you are. It could be from the



teacher who taught your most difficult class or a class you thought you wouldn't like but did. Students "should really be looking for recommendations from teachers and mentors who know them especially well and can give rich context to their work ethic, character, persistence and growth," Bissic says.

Shields agrees: "If you struggled with a subject and had a good rapport with the teacher, you can get a helpful recommendation if the teacher can talk about how you came for extra help or you were able to advocate for yourself."



#5 MYTH

It's a mistake to get creative with your essay.

ON THE CONTRARY, BEING CLEVER and original can help you stand out from the crowd – but only if you can pull it off. If you're not funny, don't try to be. If you're not impassioned about a controversial subject, don't pretend to be. "You need to make the case for why you care about something and what you're doing about it," advises Serota. But do think carefully about what you choose to share, such as a mental health issue or a gambling or drug problem. "Be careful about revealing things that would make the reader feel a sense of caution about you," Serota says.

And while you may be tempted to write about how the pandemic affected you and your family, consider that admissions officers will likely be inundated with essays on the topic. "It's immediately likely to blend in, and it becomes that much more difficult to stand out," says Ethan Sawyer, author of "College Admission Essentials" and "College Essay Essentials." He encourages students to instead use the extra space provided by the Common and Coalition applications to describe the effects of the pandemic on their families. And he says it's not necessary to worry about making that section of your app sing. "Students shouldn't be shy about bullet points," Sawyer says. "Value information over poetry."

An essay's most important quality is that it feels authentic, Serota and others say. Make sure that it addresses the prompt, but also think of your essay as an opportunity to reveal your true voice and to highlight who you really are. Admissions folks are experts at distinguishing between viewpoints that feel genuine and those that don't. The most compelling essays reveal something about an applicant's personality, Kostell says.

Moe de La Viez of Frederick, Maryland, thought her voice and interests would come through most clearly in a visual essay, which she submitted to Goucher when she applied in 2015. "I felt like I could personalize my application more if I did it myself on video," explains de La Viez, a 2019 Goucher grad who got interested in video production in high school and ultimately crafted an interdisciplinary major at the college involving communications, creative writing and studio art under the umbrella of video production.

When it comes to large universities in particular, it may be hard to believe that there are human beings who are actually reading and giving careful consideration to your app, but it's true. During the review process, "multiple sets of eyes read every piece of the application, essay and letters of recommendation," says Brigger, whose university reviews more than 44,000 first-year applications per year.

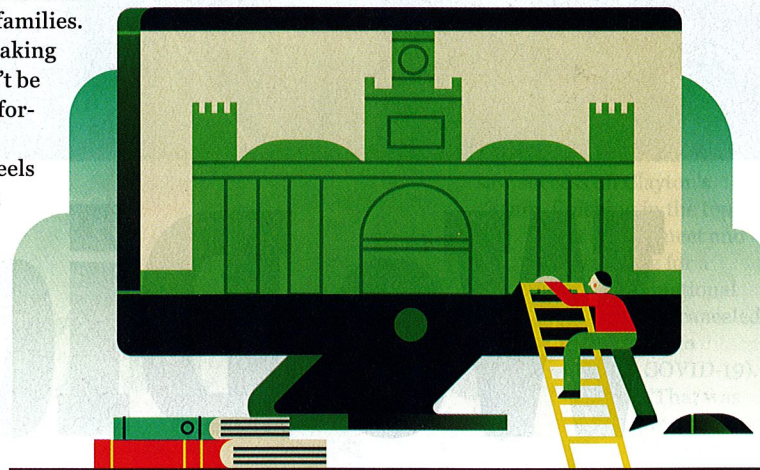
"Admissions officers and university faculty and staff are the ones making admissions decisions, not a computer or automated process." The essay is your opportunity to connect and make an impression.

#6 MYTH

To make yourself memorable, you need to visit the campus.

SINCE THE CORONAVIRUS BROUGHT visits to a screeching halt last spring, schools have introduced a wide range of virtual tools, from informal chats to tours that are meant to offer students a taste of campus life. Many competitive colleges are using these new options to gauge an applicant's "demonstrated interest." This can be shown in various ways: by calling or emailing with questions, requesting a virtual interview, contacting alumni or interacting with a representative on social media or, when possible, at a college fair. Some 40% of colleges indicate that demonstrated interest is a moderately or considerably important factor in decisions, according to the most recent NACAC data.

Admissions officers can track how many contacts you've



had with their institution – and they can even see if you've opened or engaged with emails.

Once campuses are fully reopened and old opportunities resume, spending a day on campus visiting class and talking with students, or perhaps attending a summer program for high schoolers at a college that appeals to you, can both signal your interest and help you (and the admissions office) establish that you'll be a good fit. That's key. "Fit continues to be the most important factor to us – we want students to succeed here," says Marc Harding, vice provost for enrollment at the University of Pittsburgh. Participating in such a program also shows that you're passionate and curious enough about a subject to take it to the next level. And that says a lot about your college readiness. ●

With Zackary Bennett and Margaret Loftus