

10 things the college admissions office won't tell you

By [Daniel Goldstein](#)

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Michael Witte

1. Not all grades are created equal

For the more than two million high school seniors who intend to go to college next year, the stomach-churning slog of filling out applications is in full swing.

And whether they'll get a thick package announcing their admission or a thin, dream-dashing one-page letter

(or their online equivalent) may well depend on their grade-point average. Grades account for about 75% of the typical admissions decision, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC).

But not all good grades are created equal. In the eyes of the admissions officers at the nation's more than 2,800 four-year colleges, an "A" earned at one high school may only be worth a "B" at a more rigorous one. And in recent years, colleges have given more weight to grades from designated college-prep courses—and the more exclusive the college, the more weight those grades get.

Want to stay married? Get a degree

(3:13)

If you want to get married and stay married, having a college education helps. MarketWatch's Quentin Fottrell explains.

One reason colleges are getting choosier: Grade inflation. Research by the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT, shows that the average GPA for high school seniors rose from 2.64 in 1996 to 2.90 in 2006—even as SAT scores remained essentially flat.

The researchers saw this as evidence that some teachers were "using grades...to reward good efforts rather than achievement." (The College Board also noted that, based on their test scores, less than half of SAT takers—just 43% in the graduating class of 2013—were academically prepared for college work.)

All that said, admissions officers generally believe that if you have a good GPA in high school, you'll probably have a good GPA in college.

"The clear message (is that) hard work and good grades in high school matter, and they matter a lot," said William Hiss, a retired dean of admissions at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine who co-wrote a February 2014 study on standardized testing.

See also: [10 things SAT scores won't tell you.](#)



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Make sure your application essay is really yours.

2. We don't trust your essay

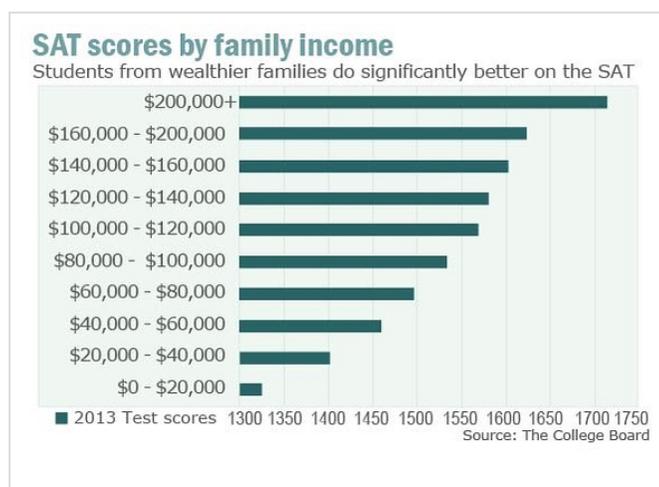
Many colleges rely on a student's application essay to create a fuller picture of the applicant. But in an era of helicopter parenting, colleges increasingly worry that these essays aren't written by the student.

To combat the possibility that parents, siblings or school counselors may be ghostwriting essays, many colleges require an additional piece of school writing that has been graded by a teacher. "If the application essay looks like it was written by Maya Angelou and the school work

looks like Willy Loman's, it will raise some eyebrows," Hiss said.

At some schools, application essays have also been caught up in the debate over whether a student's race,

ethnicity or gender should be a factor in the college's admissions decision. At some public universities where race and gender preferences are banned, admissions officers are encouraged to give less weight to the essay because it can give away clues about the race and gender of the applicant.



3. We're having second thoughts about the SAT

For decades, the SAT has been considered the primary benchmark for students' ability to handle college-level work. This year, more than 7 million students will take entrance exams like the SAT or ACT this year for college admission.

But at more schools, skepticism about the test is affecting admissions policy: About 800 out of the country's 2,800 four-year colleges now make the SAT optional.

See also: [10 things SAT scores won't tell you.](#)

Critics have long argued that the weight given to SAT scores gives an unfair advantage to wealthier students who can afford test-prep classes. That in itself makes the SAT suspect in some admissions officer's eyes. "It's leading to an increasing divide in this country of those who can afford it and those who can't," says Steven Syverson, the former dean of admissions at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis.

There are also growing doubts over how well the SAT predicts college performance. A [study produced this year and endorsed by the NACAC](#) looked at the performance of 123,000 students admitted to college between 2003 and 2010, about 30% of whom hadn't taken the SAT or its counterpart, the ACT. The study found no significant differences in college GPAs or graduation rates between those who took either test and those who didn't.

Syverson says many admissions officers are looking forward to the rollout in 2016 of a new SAT that is designed to better reflect typical high-school curricula.

Many admissions officers are now giving more weight to Advanced Placement tests, which, like the SAT, are administered by the College Board. In 2013, 2.2 million students took AP tests, up 6% from a year earlier and more than double the number a decade earlier. AP tests essentially reflect a test taker's mastery of college-level skill and knowledge; successful test takers often can skip some entry-level college courses, and some scores can count toward a major.

"Most deans feel pretty good about AP results since they are based on more of a tight curriculum," Hiss said.

4. Obsessing over class ranking? That's adorable

In 1993, more than 40% of admissions counselors viewed class rank as "considerably important," according to the NACAC. By 2006, that figure had declined to under 20%.

Hiss notes that in a small class of 100 students, being outside the top 10% doesn't mean that you're not



AFP/Getty Images

The perks of being in the top 10% are dwindling.

capable of doing college-level work. "Is the fourteenth-ranked student in that class still a good college prospect? The answer is probably yes."

Where rank still comes in to play is at larger colleges, where "holistic" reviews of applicants aren't possible. But at smaller, more selective schools, the interview, essays and teacher and counselor recommendations get greater weight than rank, the NACAC says.



AFP/Getty Images

Memo to high-school students: You need to impress this guy.

5. It pays to make nice with your

teacher

As skepticism grows over GPAs and test scores, some admissions officers are giving more weight to recommendations from high-school teachers and counselors.

Angel Perez, dean of admissions for Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., says the most useful recommendations show that the student is intellectually curious and contributes to class discussions. "We also ask 'How does the student respond to setbacks, how does the student interact in teams?'" Perez says.



Warner Bros/Everett Collection

He actually may be Ivy League material.

6. We only sound exclusive

There are only about 100 U.S. colleges offered admission to less than a third of their applicants in 2013, according to the U.S. News & World Report. But a low admissions rate can help a college look "exclusive"—improving its scores in national college-rankings—and admissions officers say that some colleges try to finesse that rate.

"Right, wrong, or indifferent, our culture values exclusivity," said Perry Robinson, vice president and director of admissions at Denison University in Columbus,

Ohio. "And yet it is one of the easiest figures to manipulate."

Tim Groseclose, a professor at George Mason University who formerly served as a faculty adviser to the

admissions committee at the University of California at Los Angeles, says some schools deliberately try to play with the numbers by getting more high school applicants to apply, even if they aren't planning on attending. And Syverson, the former Lawrence admissions, says that colleges sometimes count incomplete packages as complete ones, the better to increase their applications-to-acceptances ratio.

Groseclose says that sometimes competitive schools encourage students with unique talents to apply even if their grades and test scores may not be among the best. And at times, he notes, that can work in the student's favor: "I know of one school that admitted a student because they happened to be the state's horseshoe-pitching champion."

Does that mean Tom Cruise's character in "Risky Business" really had a shot at getting in to Princeton? "Sometimes it can be like hitting the lottery," Groseclose says.



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Should race, ethnicity or 'legacy' status help an applicant join the crowd?

7. Politics may determine whether you get in

The role of race and ethnicity has been a polarizing issue in admissions. The NACAC says that about one third of colleges and universities consider an applicant's race as a factor.

At some public universities, racial admissions preferences have been banned by state law, though critics have accused some schools of working around those bans. In California, racial preferences were banned by state referendum in the 1990s. But Groseclose has argued that UCLA got around that ban during the years when he

worked with the admissions committee by implementing a "holistic" evaluation system that let admissions officers consider race. (UCLA has denied the "holistic" review process was an end-around the racial preferences ban.)

One practice that's generally legal: "Legacy" admissions, where children of alumni and wealthy donors—or of powerful lawmakers who have a say in public university funding—get special consideration in the application process. "If it were up to me, I would make legacy admissions illegal in both public and private universities, especially if those schools took a dime of public funding," says Groseclose.



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If you're from Kansas or Korea, it could cost almost three times as much to attend.

8. We'd rather admit someone who can pay full price

According to the College Board, 10% of college freshmen in 2013 were foreign students. One reason colleges woo these international scholars: Many are wealthy enough to pay the full price of tuition.

At publicly funded state universities, higher tuition for out-of-state students often helps subsidize education for state residents. For example, for an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, in-state tuition is

about \$13,000 a year; for an out-of-state or foreign student, tuition is about \$36,000 a year.

See also: [University of California's Napolitano defends foreign student admissions.](#)

"Many universities look to international students as a panacea to their financial ills," says Robinson, the Denison admissions dean. "They are admitting the out-of-state residents because they are a cash cow, a revenue stream for them," Robinson said. In some states, this has led to battles among legislators and alumni over whether the number of foreign and out-of-state students should be capped.

The foreign-student pipeline can also have pitfalls, says Perez of Pitzer. In some countries, some students pay big money to sometimes unscrupulous "agents" to help them gain entry to prestigious U.S. schools. "You can interview a student for a freshman class and find out the student who shows up in the fall is completely different, because they hired someone to do the interview for them," he said. "I didn't get into admissions to become a police officer, but that's what the job requires now."



Getty Images

Less crowded high school classrooms mean more headaches for colleges.

9. We need you more than you need us

After 15 years of steady growth, the number of U.S. high school graduates leveled off this year at 3.2 million; it's expected to stay at that level until 2020 before starting to rise again, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

That means more colleges will be chasing after fewer students. "The public believes that it's so hard to get into college, but the reality is that most colleges are scrambling to find applicants to fill out freshman classes," says Syverson.

As a result, students who get into more than one school may be able to do some horse-trading on tuition, notes Matthew Pittinsky, the CEO of Parchment.com, an online college-admissions credentials-management website. "It's just like going to the dealer and negotiating a better rate for your new car," he says.



AFP/Getty Images

Social-media misbehavior has led colleges to unfriend some applicants.

10. Just because you get admitted doesn't mean you'll stay admitted

About 22% of colleges revoked at least one offer of admission in 2009 (the most recent year studied), according to the NACAC. The most commonly cited reasons were senioritis-impacted final grades (65%), disciplinary issues (35%) and falsification of application information (29%).

But in recent years, [student postings on social media](#) have increasingly prompted colleges to take a second

look at their some admission offers. Perez of Pitzer recalls an incident in which a student the college had decided to admit was found to be harassing a high-school teacher on Facebook. "It was a difficult situation, but I pulled the admissions letter before it was printed," Perez says. "I got hateful tweets, but we are in an uber-selective environment. We just can't take the chance."

"The bottom line is that the schools are trying to protect themselves," Robinson said. "What they see electronically is not always what they see on paper."

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