



Understanding Selective College Admissions



Defining “Selective” or “Competitive”

More academically eligible applicants than space

About 20% schools have admit rates < 50%

Selectivity does not mean quality

Average Acceptance Rate for Four-Year Colleges: 66.7 percent

Selectivity	National share of institutions	Average number of applications per institution	National share of applications	National share of full-time, freshmen undergraduates
Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants	19.2%	12,492	36.5%	21.3%
50 to 70 percent	33.4%	6,108	31.0%	32.3%
71 to 85 percent	28.8%	5,625	24.6%	33.4%
More than 85 percent	18.6%	2,771	7.9%	13.0%

SOURCE: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017-18). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES. [Includes Title-IV participating, four-year public and private not-for-profit, degree-granting (primarily baccalaureate) institutions in the US that enroll first-time freshman and are not open admission.]

Holistic Admission Process

Human process

Looking for fit: Will the student be happy? What will they contribute? Will they graduate?

Demonstrate uniqueness beyond test scores and grades

Intellectual curiosity

Each college has an application review process and institutional goals

William Fitzsimmons, Harvard Dean of Admission and Financial Aid:

"Each year we admit about 2,100 applicants. We like to think that all of them have strong personal qualities and character, that they will educate and inspire their classmates over the four years of college, and that they will make a significant difference in the world after they leave Harvard."

Additional Requirements for Selective Schools

- ✓ Required Essay(s)
- ✓ Short Answer Questions
- ✓ Secondary School Report
- ✓ Counselor Recommendation
- ✓ Teacher Recommendation(s)
- ✓ Interview with alum or admission staff
- ✓ CSS Profile in addition to FAFSA

PERCENTAGE OF COLLEGES ATTRIBUTING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IMPORTANCE TO FACTORS IN ADMISSION DECISIONS: FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN, FALL 2023, NACAC

	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
High school grades in college prep courses	185	76.8	15.1	4.9	3.2
Total high school grades (all courses)	185	74.1	18.9	5.4	1.6
Strength of high school curriculum	185	63.8	22.7	10.3	3.2
Positive character attributes	184	28.3	37.5	18.5	15.8
Essay or writing sample	185	18.9	37.3	26.5	17.3
Student's interest in attending	185	15.7	27.6	25.4	31.4
Counselor recommendation	185	11.9	40.0	27.6	20.5
Teacher recommendation	185	10.8	40.5	28.1	20.5
Extracurricular activities	185	6.5	44.3	30.8	18.4
High school class rank	183	5.5	22.4	43.2	29.0
Admission test scores (ACT, SAT)	185	4.9	25.4	38.9	30.8
Portfolio	185	4.9	10.8	24.3	60.0
Interview	185	4.3	8.6	32.4	54.6
Work	185	2.2	30.8	40.0	27.0
State graduation exam scores	185	1.6	6.5	18.4	73.5
Subject test scores (AP, IB)	185	1.1	22.2	25.9	50.8

What's Important?



Marcie Frederickson & Ujash Patel, 2018

Grades & Strength of Curriculum

Core GPA vs Cumulative GPA

Take challenging courses but do not overwhelm and allow all grades to fall

Teacher & Counselor Recommendations

Packet on Counseling website

Counselor rec required - get to know us before senior year :)

Choose teachers who can speak to your character, who REALLY like you

- Choose recommenders who know you *well* and are likely to write a *strong* recommendation for you.
- Provide the attached questionnaires and a copy of your academic resume (use the attached template or your existing, updated resume from mentoring). The more information they have, the stronger the recommendation will be.
- Give your recommender **AT LEAST TWO WEEKS - PREFERABLY A MONTH (OR MORE) TO FINISH.**
- **APPROACH is everything.** Remember, it is *NOT* a requirement to write you a letter. Be sure to *ASK* if a letter can be written - and don't forget to say PLEASE and THANK YOU. Teachers, counselors, coaches, etc. all have the right to *decline* your request.
- After your letter is written, don't forget to **thank your recommender *in person*.** Of course chocolate & coffee are gracious, but a simple handwritten thank you note will mean just as much.

RECOMMENDATION MYTHS...

- The teachers/counselors have a form letter they use for all students.
 - ✓ **YIKES! No Way!** If this is true...run away quick! Every letter we write should be as individual as you are.
- It's one recommendation. It doesn't take much time to write!
 - ✓ Recommendations often take 1-2 hours of uninterrupted time to write. We may have 6 other recommendations to write before yours and it's hard to write while teaching class. We need some time to make sure we get your recommendation written on time.
- I don't need to see my teacher in person. I'll just send a recommendation request online.
 - ✓ **ALWAYS** request a recommendation in person. Best plan is to ask first in person and follow up with online recommendation request as a reminder.



Standardized Tests

Colleges take both ACT & SAT

SAT subject tests?

SuperScore?

[Fairtest.org](https://www.fairtest.org) - *test optional schools* - does adding a test score add value to your application?

[School Profile of last year's incoming freshman class](#) - WashU.

[School Profile of last year's incoming freshman class](#) - UPenn

Demonstrated Interest

Used to discern between casual and authentically interested candidates

Students should:

- Read all email and respond in a friendly, businesslike tone
- Meet admission reps at schools, regional college fairs, complete forms, shake hands, and express interest
- Initiate contact with a meaningful email question or thank you
- Make formal visits to campuses if possible
- YouTube Channel - new to me!

EXPLORING COLLEGE OPTIONS: KANSAS CITY, MO

Thursday, October 5, 2023 at 6:30 PM until 8:00 PM Central Daylight Time

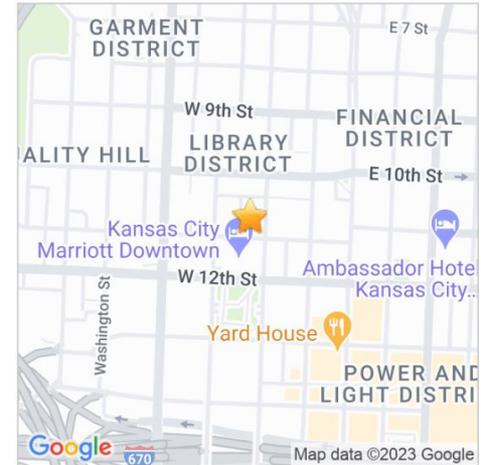
Kansas City Marriott Downtown
200 W 12th St
Kansas City, MO 64105
United States



The Exploring College Options programs start promptly. We suggest arriving 15 to 20 minutes beforehand to complete the sign-in process and find a seat. Programs typically last one and a half hours. Please feel free to bring your parent or guardian to the program, and if you have any friends who you think might be interested, please direct them to this website for registration information.

If you cannot attend this event, please go to our [website](#) for a complete listing of regional Exploring College Options programs.

Registration is no longer available because the registration deadline has passed.



Map and Directions

<https://www.exploringcollegeoptions.org/>

Extracurricular Activities

Meaningful involvement in a few things

Princeton's admissions office:

"We are interested in the talents and interests you would bring to Princeton outside the classroom. We don't value one type of activity over another. Rather, we appreciate sustained commitment to the interests you have chosen to pursue."

Essays

Chance to share things about student not already included in application

Start early - Common App publishes their questions a year in advance

[William and Mary - Some Dos and Don'ts of Writing a College Essay](#)

Interview

Usually with alumnus but may be an admission representative

After application submission

Sometimes optional

Used more to boost than to hurt (What are you most proud of? Is this college a good fit? Don't be afraid to share accomplishments. Be yourself and let your personality shine. Do a mock interview first!)

Ask questions

Timelines

Early Decision

- Binding commitment
- Only one school
- Deadline typically November or December
- Receive results usually in January/February
- Send deposit well in advance of May 1
- Should still apply regular decision to other schools

Early Action

- No commitment
- Deadline typically November or December
- Receive results December-February
- Should still apply regular decision to other schools

Regular Decision

- Deadline typically early January
- Results mid-late March, April 1
- Decision May 1

Waitlist

Deferred

[NACAC Visual](#)

Early Decision

Binding Decision - can only apply Early Decision to ONE school

Typically does have a higher admit rate than early action or regular decision

Not for everybody - means you are committing to that school if admitted

[Forbes 2024 article on Early Decision](#)

[Northwestern Applied Learning: Understanding Early Decision](#)

- Highly recommend this video
- About half of incoming freshman class admitted through Early Decision

Early Action

Non-Binding Decision - can apply to multiple schools Early Action

Will still hear back earlier than those that wait until regular decision - basically gives you more time to make your decision

Typically still a higher percentage of students being admitted than those waiting until regular decision

- Part of this could be that there is a better pool of applicants applying early action
- Part of this could be that there are far MORE applicants applying regular decision, meaning a smaller percentage overall will be admitted

EARLY DECISION VS. EARLY ACTION

Who should apply early decision?

- Has researched colleges extensively.
- Is sure that the college is a great choice - no regrets if admitted.
- Has found a college that is a strong match academically, socially and geographically.
- Meets or exceeds the admission profile for the college for SAT® scores, GPA and class rank.
- Has an academic record that has been consistently solid over time
- Can answer this question confidently with a ‘no’- Will I have any regrets if I am admitted and have to attend this school next year?”

Who should not apply early decision?

- Has not thoroughly researched colleges.
- Is applying early just to avoid stress and paperwork.
- Is not fully committed to attending the college.
- Is applying early only because friends are.
- Needs a strong senior fall semester to bring grades up.
- Unsure on finances and financial aid packages that could be provided by other colleges that could be a better fit for your family

Application Platform

Common App

Coalition

Common Black College Application

Directly via College Website (MIT is an example) [Application Management Portal](#)

Cost & Aid

Net price calculators

Some schools meet 100% need, are need-blind in admissions

[CollegeGreenlight.com](https://www.collegegreenlight.com)

- Colleges that meet 100% Need
- Fly-In programs

[MyIntuition](https://www.myintuition.com)

Highly Competitive Scholarships

- QuestBridge
- Jack Kent Cook
- Coca Cola
- Gates Millennium
- Jackie Robinson

CSS Profile

- In addition to FAFSA
- More info about family finances
- Not free
- Institutional methodology vs. federal methodology for determining financial aid

Other Resources

[SchoolLinks](#)

Princeton Review Student Surveys

Gladwell, M. (2011, February). The Order of Things: What College Rankings Really Tell Us. The New Yorker, 68-75.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/the-order-of-things>

College Board: Early Decision and Early Action <https://counselors.collegeboard.org/college-application/early-decision-action>

Insider Guide: Getting into College - Vanderbilt <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKARNadxshU&t=5s>

An Introduction to the College Application Process - UPenn
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07nA4UIVpn8&list=PLBr4OKx-PKLwzZNIT65RFDuxh8k2M53mw&index=17>

Application Advice: Activities and Impact - UPenn <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiHV999266l&list=PLBr4OKx-PKLwzZNIT65RFDuxh8k2M53mw&index=20>

Essay Writing Workshop - UPenn <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD0BUDZqmKk&list=PLBr4OKx-PKLwzZNIT65RFDuxh8k2M53mw&index=19>

NACAC State of College Admissions Report - <https://www.nacacnet.org/2019-state-of-college-admission-report/>

Applied Learning Videos (15) - Northwestern University - [Applied Learning - YouTube](#)

Doe Stone, L. (2025, August). What Colleges Really Want In An Outstanding Application. Forbes [What Colleges Really Want in a Standout Application in 2025](#)

Questions?

Thank you for attending!!