



**Princeton College Consulting**  
Navigating Students Through Admissions

# Insider's Guide to Selective College Admissions 2023

**Maximize Potential**

**Tell Your Story**

**Earn Admission**

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## Foreword

It is no secret that, for the last few years, being a teenager and applying to college has been anything but typical. A global pandemic causing disruptions, changes to standardized testing, severely curtailed extracurricular activities, remote learning leading to relaxed but uneven grading policies from school to school, and more. While life has largely returned to normal, there are still vestiges that remain post-pandemic such as test-optional schools and GAP year deferrals leaving less room for incoming applicants. But for students, the stress and pressure to get into a good college remains.

In fact, in some circles, the pressure to “get into a top-tier college” can be so intense that students and families often get caught up in some unfortunate myths. Misinformation propagated by friends, relatives or dubious internet resources can cause us to lose sight of what actually matters.

First, this guide is designed to provide an organizing principle for thinking about your college admissions process. Further, it also provides a more accurate picture of the college admission landscape while demystifying how decisions are actually made in highly selective college admissions offices. Lastly, the advice within this document is actionable on how to get it done right. Whether you are a high school senior completing your applications, or an 8th grader or earlier setting goals and making plans, this guide will make you a much savvier applicant!



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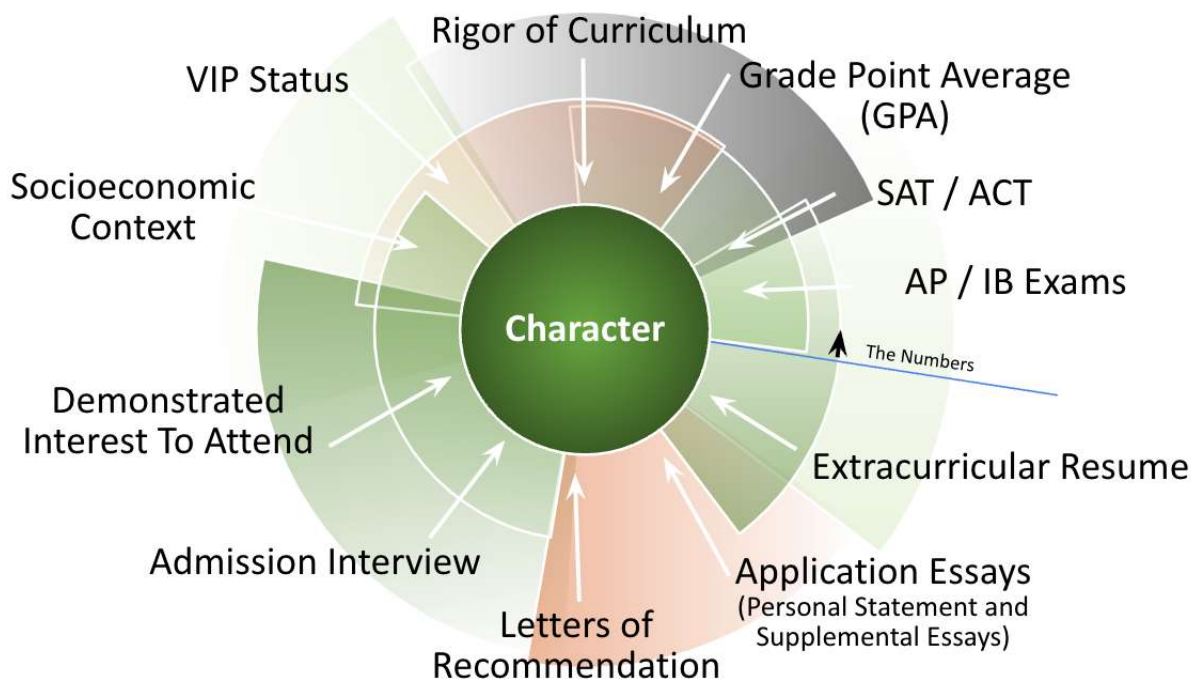
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## What Your High School Counselor Won't Share With You

The college admissions process is a character-based evaluation. Because almost every selective college will tell you their review process is holistic, the savviest applicants think of the following 11 distinct aspects of a college application as deeply interrelated.



When admissions committees review your application, **they are going to evaluate how different elements of your character manifest through each of these facets of your application** in order to build a picture of the whole person; i.e. you!

For colleges which receive thousands of applications, in order to remain organized as they attempt to create a diverse and interesting class, they often create a system to rank or index applicants. Indexing systems can vary (Stanford, Dartmouth, Michigan and UC Berkeley all do it slightly differently), and colleges vary in selectivity, but they will all consider these same 11 aspects of your application.

Here's how the savviest applicants approach each.





## 1. Rigor of Curriculum

Rigor of Curriculum refers to the number and level of high school courses completed in the five core subject areas (Math, Science, English, Social Studies and Foreign Language) and academic electives. All selective colleges value students that are not afraid to challenge themselves.

In fact, exposure to a rigorous curriculum in high school is a strong predictor of academic success in college. If available this may include [Advanced Placement \(AP\)](#), [International Baccalaureate \(IB\)](#), and other college level courses, but it is important to keep in mind that your goals, performance, developing interests, and strategic choices, both in and out of the classroom, should influence the rigor of the curriculum you choose to pursue.

Generally, colleges like to see students progress from regular level (i.e. College Placement/Prep) courses to Honors and to Advanced Placement courses when the student is succeeding at each of the preceding levels. However, it is critical to understand that choosing your curriculum is about finding the right balance between your academic and extracurricular endeavors. In other words, you should challenge and push yourself as far as your capacity will allow without compromising your grades or your key activities outside of the classroom.

Although selective colleges will evaluate your curriculum relative to all applicants, particularly to peers at your high school, they will most importantly evaluate the transcript in the context of your specific circumstances and how much you have challenged yourself relative to the curriculum that your school offers.

Given that choosing your optimal curriculum requires finding the right balance across everything you do, do not believe anyone who tells you that squeezing that extra AP course in during lunch hour is going to be what helps you stand out from the pack.

In fact, it may have the exact opposite effect. You may be a hard worker showing dedication to your studies, but lunch is important to be physically and mentally healthy which colleges value. And valuing your lunch time demonstrates good judgment. In fact, college admissions officers will question your judgement if you are not caring for yourself. There is an epidemic of students getting to college with mental health issues and they are on the watch. If your goal is to strive for peak performance both in and out of the classroom, if you are not physically and mentally healthy, that won't happen.



It is true that the rigor of courses may vary by school and even by teacher within a school, but savvy students don't worry about what they cannot control. Adopting this mentality demonstrates perspective; another important character trait colleges will be looking for.

Typically, your curriculum offerings and guidelines may be found in your School Profile and Program of Studies. Study these carefully before going to your school counselor to select courses for next year. Going in with an initial course map and plan that is ambitious, realistic, and well designed will make a good impression on an important gatekeeper. [Building a strong relationship with your guidance counselor](#) is one of the most important things you can do.

Here is a table you can use to plot your curriculum plan.



## 4-year Course Progression Table

Class	9th. Grade	Final Grade	10th. Grade	Final Grade	11th. Grade	Final Grade	12th. Grade
Mathematics							
Science							
Language Arts							
Social Studies							
Foreign Language							
Elective							
Elective							
Summer Course							
Gym/Health							
Visual/Performing Arts							
21st Century							





## 2. Grade Point Average (GPA)

Because high schools have vastly different ways they weight your GPA, **colleges often have a system to recalculate your GPA that involves unweighting your grades and removing non-core courses.** It should go without saying that colleges value those students who maintain a high core GPA, but they are also interested in your grade trend. This means that while 11th grade is paramount, keeping grades up throughout senior year is equally important as colleges have deferred record numbers of early applicants!

It also means that a student can recover from a less-than-ideal start in 9th grade (some colleges do not even consider 9th grade in their evaluations; e.g. University of California system) by showing a continuous upwards trend in grades throughout the balance of high school.

It is generally recommended high school students try to allow an average of [3-4 hours a day](#) for reading, studying and homework. Completing your work and study in this amount of time with high grades and a manageable amount of stress and anxiety, is a good indication that you should consider increasing the rigor of your curriculum.

The most cliché dilemma students continue to ask about: “Is it better to get an A in a less challenging course or a B in a more rigorous one?”. The easy answer, only half joking, is its best to get an A in the more rigorous course. More frustrating, the real answer is--it depends.



Generally, if you are earning an A in the subject area you should consider stepping up to the next level even if you feel it may mean bringing the possibility of earning a B. However, if the more challenging course(s) eats away an undue amount of time, causing grades to dip in other courses, compromising your ability to participate in extracurricular activities or sacrificing an untenable amount of sleep, it may not be wise.

It is important to set short and longer term targets for your performance within specific courses and your overall GPA. Having well-defined goals, and closely monitoring progress is the key to setting an ambitious yet realistic strategic plan. Using the right tools ([Evernote](#), [Roam Research](#) or [Notion](#)) while establishing strong [study habits](#) will also be key contributors to your success.



### 3. SAT/ACT

2020, 2021 and 2022 were filled with great uncertainty and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. Where standardized testing is concerned, colleges and universities have taken the stance to relax their testing requirements and, as of this writing, more than [1,900 colleges and universities around the U.S. are currently test optional](#). Many will remain that way for at least the next few years and possibly beyond. This is not a new phenomenon. In fact, prior to the pandemic, more than 1,000 colleges and universities were already test optional but another 900 U.S. colleges and universities have joined the ranks of test optional and test-blind schools and currently more than 200 of them are in the top tiers of schools in their respective categories.

Many people have asked if “optional” really means optional and if students who do not submit an SAT or ACT will be disadvantaged in some way. [Bob Schaeffer, the interim Executive Director of FairTest stated](#), “It is important for students, their families, and counselors to understand that [‘test-optional means optional.’](#) In other words, students who do not submit results from standardized exams will neither be advantaged or disadvantaged. Many of these schools will remain ACT/SAT optional for admissions cycles after fall 2023.”

Additionally, there is a small but growing list of [test-blind schools](#) that will not consider SAT/ACT scores even if you submit them.

However, as life has largely returned to normal even though the virus is still with us, [there is still a question around which schools may reinstate the SAT/ACT](#) requirement for this fall’s application cycle in 2023. MIT was the first institution to revert to their prior policy and has reinstated the requirement to submit an SAT or ACT score. While schools such as [Tufts University](#) and [Haverford College](#) have stated that they will be test optional for at least the next two to three years, there are a number that have yet to state their intentions for the upcoming current application cycle. For that reason, we are advising most of our students who will be applying to college in the fall of 2023 to plan to take either the SAT or ACT exam. The decision on whether or not to submit them can be made later on depending on your college list and whether or not your GPA is high enough to warrant bypassing the SAT or ACT.

One important aspect of standardized testing is that colleges use scores to compare applicants from different high schools where rigor and grading may vary. Additionally, there are some colleges that do not require the SAT or ACT, but may use them to help award merit based scholarships. In most cases, colleges that are not requiring an SAT or ACT are awarding merit scholarships without considering SAT or ACT scores.

Precocious students should consider trying their hand at these tests at an early age since scoring well as a younger student may qualify you for selective academic enrichment programs like the [Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth](#), [Duke TIP](#) and [Stanford’s Summer Institutes](#). Additionally, once you have completed Geometry and Algebra II/Trigonometry, you will have seen all of the math that will appear on either an ACT or SAT. As such, if possible, taking the test earlier in high school will free up much needed time later to focus on other areas of your development beyond the classroom that will be just as important for your future college admissions process.







Regardless, you should plan to take the Pre-SAT (PSAT) in the fall of both 10th and 11th grade. Because these scores will correlate to SAT and ACT scores, it is an opportunity to understand your baseline prior to additional preparation. While your 10th grade PSAT is mainly for practice and to introduce you to what it feels like to take these kinds of tests, the 11th grade PSAT is also the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

Many people ask if the PSAT counts in the college admissions process. The short answer is, it does not. However, if you qualify for the National Merit Scholarship you will certainly be able to add that to your resume.



Although they have recently been made more similar, the SAT and ACT remain different tests and some students score significantly better on one or the other. [Taking a well-designed and calibrated SAT/ACT diagnostic test can help you fully understand their differences and evaluate which test you are best suited for.](#) Because all colleges accept both tests, choosing to study for one or the other will greatly streamline the preparation process. We do not recommend submitting both tests to colleges.

After selecting the best test you should choose a preparation method according to your learning style, schedule and goals. You can study independently, with peers in a course or with a private tutor. With any method it is important that you have a planned preparation schedule and take multiple practice tests.

Because many colleges will use "Score Choice" (allow you to choose to submit or not submit scores from a particular test date) and "Super Score" (use the highest score on individual sections of the test from multiple test dates), taking the test multiple times can significantly increase your overall score. At the same time, you want to be strategic since some colleges require you to submit results from all test dates. Make sure to thoroughly research the colleges you are considering prior to mapping out your testing schedule!

#### **4. AP / IB Exams**

AP and IB Exams correspond to core subject areas and sometimes specific courses within core subject areas. They provide a mechanism for colleges to assess a student's readiness for college level work because they give colleges the ability to compare students on an "apples to apples" basis within their peer groups at their own high schools and around the world. It is more difficult to do that with a student's grades because teaching from school to school can vary. In other words, similar to the SAT and ACT, colleges consider these tests to account for differences in rigor and grading at different high schools.

Traditionally, these exam results have not played a significant role in college admissions decisions but with the elimination of SAT Subject Tests this is changing. Going forward, for those students who pursue them, AP and IB Courses will likely increase in importance and will serve as a mechanism to demonstrate advanced competency in specific subject areas. See guide on how to incorporate [AP courses](#) and exams or [IB programs](#) into your planning.

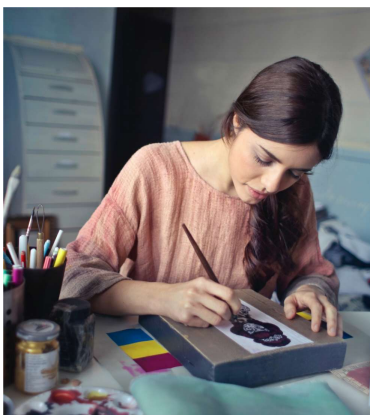
Additionally, moving forward, most accelerated 7 / 8 year medical programs and some specialized engineering programs will be looking for students to submit AP exam results in Calculus, Biology, Chemistry and possibly Physics.



## 5. Extracurricular Resume

Applicants to selective colleges must complete an extracurricular resume or “activity sheet.” It may include co-curricular participation and recognition, volunteer and / or paid work experience, community service, hobbies and athletics.

Selective colleges seek an intellectually curious, socially conscious and active student body. Because they are interested in a well-rounded class they prefer students who develop a serious commitment to a few areas of activity rather than dabble in many. They look for commitment over time and growth into [leadership](#) (although it is not always necessary) and achievement. Because colleges are looking to build a diverse incoming class of attitudes and interests, they are not concerned with how impressive an activity sounds on a resume. Rather, because students have a wide range of interests, they care much more what you make of the activities that you choose to pursue. As a rough guide, strong resumes include leadership, achievement and impact. Also strong resumes may include recognition at the local level, very strong at the state level and exceptionally strong at the national level.



Students should strategically prioritize interests and activities for the upcoming school years and summer, which does not mean trying to “look good for college”; it means planning to take advantage of opportunities to explore and develop interests within the limited resource of time. Don’t underestimate the importance of developing activities doing things that you enjoy. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to sustain the level of commitment necessary to develop meaningful depth in any activity if you do not.

One of the most important things to consider when it comes to picking those extracurricular activities that you are going to pursue is to understand that **it is not what you do that matters, it is what you make of the opportunity that counts**. Again, the goal is to pick a few areas of focus that you enjoy and then strive to do them really well and at a significant level of depth. Colleges are looking for students who demonstrate significant potential to do bigger things after college and what you do with the activities you participate in today will be an important indicator of that.

How do you know that you are achieving the right level of immersion in your chosen activities? Ask yourself the following questions, if you can answer them with significant depth and substance then you may be in good shape. If not, then you need to dig more deeply into your chosen activities:

1. What do you do?
2. Why do you do it?
3. What challenges have you faced?
4. How have you overcome them?
5. What have you learned about yourself?
6. How have you applied these learnings in other areas of your life?



In pursuing your activities, if you haven't encountered meaningful challenges and problems along the way that require real work to solve them then it is likely you haven't really immersed yourself. Additionally, it may be difficult for you to reflect on what you have learned about yourself when you think about the challenges you have faced and solved but this is critical so dig in and give it the thought it deserves. This will pay off in your essays, admissions interviews and letters of recommendation.

Activity	Grades Participated	Hours/Week	Week/Year	Leadership /Achievements/Honors

Because college admissions officers may search for you online (and because it is an opportunity to highlight your achievements and personality, providing "social proof" of your activities and character can give you an edge. In addition to social media, most colleges will welcome supplemental creative work through their application.

**Plan your activities and time wisely!**





## 6. Application Essays

### *a. Personal Statement*

Applicants to selective colleges are required to write a 650 word personal essay on the Common App. [The prompts for this essay change slightly from year to year](#), but you will typically be asked to write about a meaningful experience through the lens of you as a storyteller. This essay is incredibly important to colleges because it is a representation of your character, perspective, writing ability and indicator of potential that helps admissions committees form that holistic picture of who you are and how you would fit in on their campus. A common mindset here is, how you write is how you think, which makes this a great opportunity to showcase that you have what it takes to succeed at your college of choice.



To write a compelling personal essay you want to tell a story that illustrates traits central to your identity. Identifying 3-5 character strengths that best describe you can be a good starting point.

Rather than just “tell” the reader those traits, the most compelling essays “show” them and let the readers come to their own conclusion. Just like the best fiction, Details, Dialogue and Description can make a simple story highly compelling. Because the reader will have read thousands of essays it is crucial that you hook them with a great opening and continue with your authentic voice throughout!

While reading too many examples (especially out of context of the rest of the application) can be detrimental to the process, reading a few “good” essays and discussing them with a teacher or counselor can be helpful. Every year there are a couple personal essays that go viral including the [“Costco Essay”](#) which was in part responsible for the success of one young woman at multiple Ivy League colleges.

Because students often struggle to choose their topic, structure their story and find their voice, it is important to go through a thorough writing process. This will be an opportunity for you to reflect on your life and these essays are definitely not something you can rush the night before the deadline, or even the week before.

Competitive applicants begin the writing process [9 or 10 months in advance](#). You might think that essay writing is a skill you either have or you don't, but any student who embraces the process is capable of creating a great essay if you put in the time and effort. Every great essay went through multiple rounds of rewrites and revisions, so don't rush the process, start early. For a more comprehensive guide to writing the personal statement, click [here](#).







## ***b. Supplemental Essays***

Additionally, most selective colleges require one or more supplemental essays ([Stanford 8](#), [UC Berkeley \[choose 4 of 8\]](#), [Michigan 2](#)). The most common prompts will ask you to explain the development of your [intellectual interests](#), explain the impact your extracurricular activities have had on you (think back to the six questions in the extracurricular activities section) and [why you believe you are a good fit for a particular college](#). Colleges want you to have a passion for learning inside and out of the classroom and will want you to articulate why you are a good match for the particular college.



Because many colleges ask additional unique questions ([the University of Chicago--far and away--provides the most interesting prompts](#)) applying to 12 highly selective colleges can easily require students to write over 25 essays.

Supplemental college specific essay questions can be just as important as your personal essay and because prompts can be similar or overlap at different colleges, as soon as your college list is finalized you should create a strategic roadmap for completing all required essays that allows material formed for one essay to be used for multiple application prompts with appropriate customization.

Ultimately, admission committees want to learn something about you that they cannot learn in the rest of the application. They want to read something personal, thoughtful and well written; something that could not have been written by anybody else.



## 7. Letters of Recommendation

Applicants to most selective colleges typically are submitting three different kinds of [recommendations](#). First, your guidance or college counselor will be submitting one for you. Next, for most schools, you will be required to submit 2 letters of recommendation from teachers. Lastly, in many cases, additional letters from an employer, coach, volunteer supervisor or other mentors may also be appropriate. In the Common Application these are referred to as 'Other Recommenders'. These letters of recommendation are important to colleges because they personalize applicants from an outside perspective beyond the classroom. Let's take a look at each.

### **a. Counselor Recommendation**

Almost all schools require a guidance or college counselor recommendation. The most important question to ask yourself is how well does your counselor know you? The reason—because he or she will have to write a letter of recommendation for you and how will she be able to write a compelling letter of recommendation if she does not really know you all that well. Your job is to [build a relationship](#) with your counselor over time and help her get to know you both in and out of the classroom. The earlier you start in your high school career, the better.

So take a look at the following counselor letter of recommendation. Do you think this is an excellent letter of recommendation (LOR), a good LOR or a poor LOR?

*Dear Admissions Committee,*

*I am very pleased to recommend Allison for admission to your university. I've been her school counselor for the past four years. In that time, I've heard all good things about Allison from her teachers and she is a solid honors student who does well in all her classes.*

*Allison is an involved student here at our school. She is engaged in a number of different clubs and has been a positive influence on our school community. Allison works well with her fellow students. She is a confident, motivated, and reliable young lady who applies herself to anything she is doing.*

*Allison has taken many of our most challenging classes and has earned a solid unweighted GPA of 3.76. Her commitment to her studies has made a positive impression on me as well as with her teachers. I am confident that Allison will bring these characteristics with her to the next level. I look forward to seeing her continue to grow and explore her interests as she moves forward.*

*In sum, I highly recommend Allison for admission to your college. She's bright, involved, and curious. For any further information, please contact me at [the following email address](#).*

*Sincerely,  
Mrs. Jones*

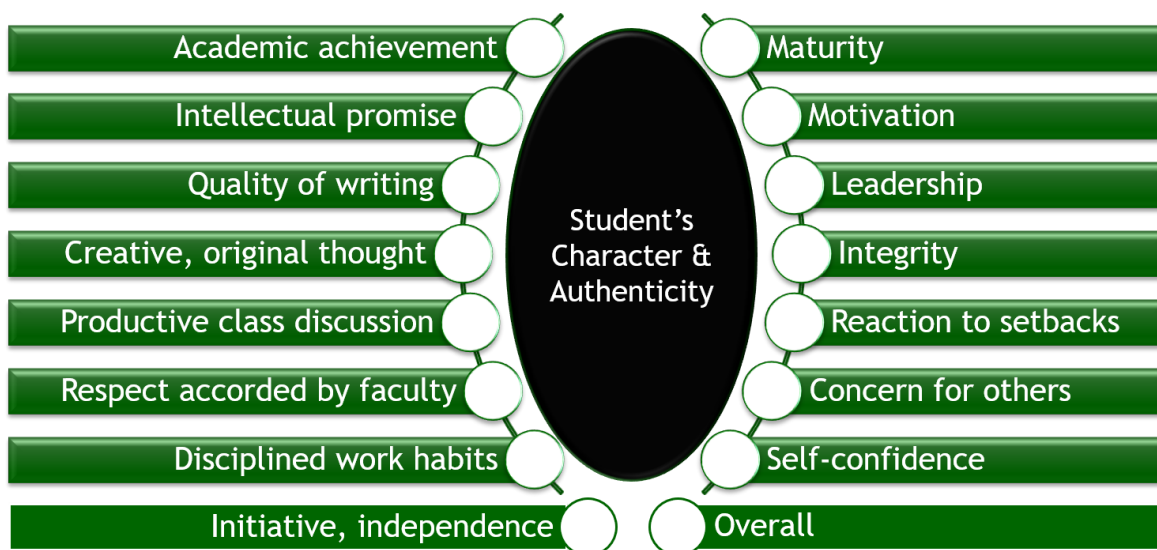
As Letters of Recommendation go, this is, at best, neutral and really pretty poor as LOR's go. Why? Because, it lacks the specific examples that would demonstrate the various ways that Allison would be a positive contributing member of any campus community and in the absence of the specifics, for the most part, the statements are really not believable.





### ***b. Teacher Recommendations***

Your teacher letters should come from two or three of your 11th grade teachers. If possible, colleges want current perspectives rather than the opinions of a teacher you had one or two years earlier. Typically, you want to make sure you have one humanities and one STEM teacher and if you are going to ask a third, it will be your choice. Your teachers will be commenting on and recounting examples of how your character manifests in the classroom and beyond such as Academic Achievement, [Intellectual Promise](#), [Leadership](#) and others as follows:



So keep these things in mind and practice implementing them in your classes. If possible, it is best to work on implementing these skills and behaviors in your classes before you get to 11th grade so that you will be ready to hit the ground running when 11th grade starts.

Being a good citizen of the school community and cultivating these relationships is important. Letters of recommendation can actually be one of the most frustrating aspects of the application for top students who are denied at their top choice colleges. Students often assume that because they have done well in a course and the teacher likes them, the letter will be great. Unless great care is taken, this is rarely the case.



### ***c. Other Recommenders***

Depending on the college, they may allow between zero and five other recommenders. At most, you should consider no more than 1 or 2 provided they each have something unique to contribute to your overall application story. The job of an 'Other Recommender' is to discuss the nature of their experience with you, demonstrate your character strengths through specific examples and discuss why you would make a great addition to your desired campus community.



### ***d. Brag Sheets***

After selecting appropriate recommenders, you should provide them and your counselor with pertinent information through a teacher / school provided "Brag Sheet" or request letter. This may include the list of colleges you are applying to, why these colleges are of interest, what about the teacher's course and your relationship with the teacher has been most meaningful, some of your proudest moments in class and related work to remind the teacher of quality and effort.

For your counselor, it might be writing about why an activity or activities have been particularly meaningful or how you have grown both in and out of the classroom. These "Brag Sheets" are your opportunity to influence what your teachers and counselor will write about you and can make the difference between a good letter and a great one. When writing your responses to the various questions, your job is to demonstrate who you are while making sure that your character, authenticity and intellectual vitality are coming through.

It is important to be precise and think about how letters will best compliment the rest of the application because teachers and counselors will often tailor their letter based on your request. It's tempting to want to read letters of recommendation before they are submitted to colleges, but waiving your right to view them is standard. Admission officers will trust them more if they know you were confident enough to have the letters go straight to them.

For a more comprehensive review of the Letter of Recommendation process, click [here](#).



## 8. Admission Interview

Most colleges consider an admission interview “optional,” but value another chance to learn about an applicant. Admission interviews can be either “on campus” with an admissions representative or “off campus” with alumni.

While you may have informal conversations with professors and students, the interviewer is the most important college representative that will have personal contact with you. The interviewer’s report can reinforce or contradict the rest of your application.

Selective colleges want students that are interested in them specifically. We recommend taking advantage of interview opportunities whenever possible. It is important that you are familiar with the [types of questions an interviewer may ask](#) and are comfortable responding. Interviewers may be impressed and engaged when you ask questions during the interview that cannot be easily looked up on the college’s website including questions about their own college experience. For example, asking questions such as:

- Why did you choose this school over the other schools that accepted you?
- What do you wish you could change about the school?

These are questions that only the interviewer can answer. The reason you want to ask these kinds of questions is that they give you the opportunity to probe a bit and possibly glean information that will help you determine whether or not this college is right for you.

The best interviews are more like a conversation than a question and answer session, but some common discussion starting questions may ask you to talk about your family, community, academic background, extra-curricular activities, and hopes and aspirations for the future. Other types of questions to be ready for are about favorite books, movies, TV shows, heroes, what the specific college has to offer you and how you will contribute to the campus community.





## 9. Demonstrated Interest (Timing of Application)

Selective colleges seek to admit students that are highly interested in attending their college partly because their ["ranking"](#) is based on how many admitted students accept their offer. Most colleges have three "times of application." Early Decision, Early Action, or Regular Decision.

Early Decision (ED) means you apply by early fall of 12th grade and receive an admissions decision the same fall. Students may apply ED to one college. To apply ED applicants are required to sign a binding contract that obligates them to attend the college if admitted. Applying ED can improve your probability of admission. The downside is you would not be able to compare financial awards from other colleges.

Early Action (EA) means students apply early in the fall of 12th grade and typically receive an admission decision the same fall. There is no binding contract so you may apply to as many colleges EA as you choose, but will typically not improve your probability of admission.

Restricted Early Action (REA) (aka Single-Choice Early Action) is very similar to EA with one important distinction. If you apply to a school via REA, you will not be able to submit applications to private colleges and universities until the Regular Decision deadline. However, you would be free to submit early applications to public universities.

Regular Decision (RD) means students apply by late fall or early winter of 12th grade and receive an admissions decision in spring.

After finalizing your college list you should consider applying ED to a top choice college if cost i.e. comparing aid packages is not the most important consideration for your family.

A lesser-known offshoot of ED is called ED 2 which is offered by a limited, but growing, number schools. ED 2 is the same as ED except the deadline is after ED admission decisions have been made. If denied admission to your ED college, applying ED 2 at a second choice that offers the option is another chance to improve your probability of admission.



We also typically recommend applying EA to as many colleges on your final list as possible to avoid last minute stress and months of anxiety which requires early planning and work. Having said that, there are some students that may be better off in RD if they need to show an upward grade trend or take a standardized test in the fall of 12th grade.

While applying ED is the ultimate way to demonstrate interest, there are other important ways to do so including making contact with representatives at college fairs and through [quality campus visits](#) (don't just take the tour!).

Lastly, at schools other than your ED school(s), it is important to demonstrate Interest in other ways such as college visits, tours, reviewing emails from the schools you are interested in and following them via social media. Whether a school is your top choice or one that is less interesting to you, you will need to treat each school as if it is your top choice because if you don't, schools will know it and they are not offering admission to students whom they believe will not attend if they make an offer.



## 10. Socioeconomic Context

Universities have long argued that constructing diverse student bodies are critical to creating an enhanced learning environment and to prepare students to go out into a globalized world. Given the Supreme Court's reversal of Affirmative Action and race-conscious admissions policies, more emphasis will have to be placed on building diverse student bodies through other means. Colleges and universities will likely focus on first-generation status and income, while also taking into account levels of parental education, occupations, geographical location, and almost every other aspect of a student's socioeconomic context.

While many people consider socioeconomic context as something that just *is*, we look at it as an opportunity for students to dig deep into their identity and begin to articulate the impact their circumstances have played in their development. The key is to break out of the inadequacy of the "checkbox" and assumptions that may accompany it. Think beyond the color of your skin or what's written on your identification papers. Diversity takes many different shapes and forms. Remember that colleges are not just looking for diversity on paper, but also diversity in interests, attitudes and thought. Expect to see essay questions on this very topic.

## 11. VIP Status / Recruited Athletes

There are some students that are considered VIPs in the college admission process. VIPs may include celebrities, children of major donors, winners of elite academic contests, successful authors and founders of successful businesses. While the previous groups of applicants are extremely rare, colleges also consider athletes recruited to play a varsity sport VIPs. Those of you who are athletes may want to keep in mind that many of the most selective colleges recruit athletes of more modest skill levels than you might think.





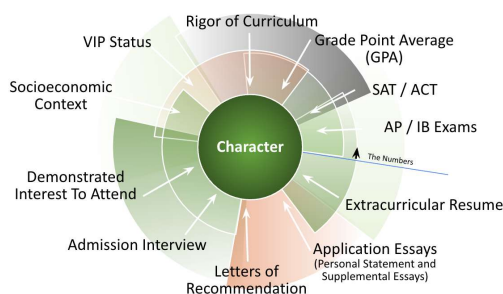


## Conclusion

While this guide has only scratched the surface of what goes into an application at selective colleges there should be a few main takeaways.

First, it is not all about grades and test scores. They may provide an important context, but no matter how high your GPA or standardized test scores; by themselves they will not make an applicant stand out at selective colleges with a pool of thousands.

Many valedictorians and students with perfect test scores will not be admitted to every school they apply to. The math is simple. There are over 30,000 valedictorians, many of whom are applying to the same colleges that may have 2,000 or less seats in their incoming classes.



Second, because there are so many moving parts, early planning is essential. **The old adage that “those who fail to plan, plan to fail” is typically true in the selective college process.** The key is for your plan to be comprehensive and integrated across all the aspects mentioned above.

Third, every student is a unique individual with his or her own story to tell. While there is no one story that is preferred, there are some common facets that are attractive to colleges including an infectious curiosity about the world and the vitality, capacity and desire to explore it. Being authentic is most important, but recognize that telling our authentic story is always a matter of “positioning.” This is not a dirty word, nor should it be.

While this brief overview is obviously not comprehensive or personalized advice, we hope it has begun to pull back the curtain on how admissions decisions at selective colleges are made and made you a little more savvy as you prepare for and complete your applications!





## Meet the Princeton College Consulting Team

Princeton College Consulting is a private college counseling practice providing college admissions assistance and athletic recruiting services. Our mission is to help students maximize the probability of earning admission and scholarships to their top-choice colleges by guiding students through a process of personal development and growth while also converting chaos and anxiety into structure and a sense of calm throughout the college admission process.

If you are the parent of a student looking to get assistance with admissions, please take some time to [book a free consultation](#) with the team at Princeton College Consulting.



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## Meet Our Team of Counselors