

## 5 Myths About Selective College Admission

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With thousands of talented students from across the globe applying to the top American colleges, it is tough to fathom how admission officers select just a small fraction. To make things worse, colleges don't really *tell* you exactly what they want. Is it better to be well rounded or to excel in one area? Do admission officers really read your essays? If you have one B on your transcript, will the top schools count you out? These are just some of the questions I often get asked by the students I work with in my role as a college admission expert.

Before I started working with students, I had the privilege of being an admission officer at an Ivy League school, reading thousands of applications and voting “admit” or “reject” for each one. There's no sugar coating it: these decisions are not easy and they are certainly not scientific. However, there are general guidelines selective college admission officers use to guide their selections—and most students have little or no understanding about the process!

In this blog post, I want to debunk five popular misconceptions about selective college admission. Read on for tips that will help you “think like an admission officer” and understand how the selection process really works.

### **Myth #1: Admission is predicated on merit**

Unfortunately for talented students, gaining admission to a selective college is not solely based on perfect strong transcripts and test scores. Think about it: they get practically *nothing but* applicants with perfect academic credentials. That being said, colleges often use their admission policies to accommodate numerous stakeholders and accomplish various goals that are not always aligned. Admission committees feel pressure from many different offices within the university. They are looking for varied things when putting together the incoming class, including:

- Leaders
- Great sports teams
- Well-rounded students
- Diversity (e.g., cultural, socioeconomic, geographical, etc.)
- Valedictorians
- Creative types
- Distinguished intellectuals
- High SAT scores
- Legacy applicants (to sustain a healthy fundraising base)
- To be competitive in college rankings like *U.S.News*—and please trustees
- Connections/fame (Did you ever notice the high number of actors who choose to go to college attending the top schools?)

Simply put, college admission policies are confusing because colleges are confused. American higher education does not have a single, clear mission.

### **Myth #2: Applications don't get read**

If computers were used to read students' applications, then admission officers would be out of a job. Of course applications get read!

For the most part, admission counselors are assigned to read applications from particular cities, countries, or regions (e.g., Pacific Northwest, India, Los Angeles) so that the counselors become familiar with the schools in

their regions and can review applicants applying from the same high schools with similar curriculums and grading scales.

Spoiler alert: if you are either supremely qualified or entirely unqualified, it is possible that only your regional admission officer will review your application. However, “borderline” candidates usually go before the admission committee for a final review.

Do some applications get skimmed while others get reviewed with interest? Of course. If you want to increase the chances that someone will take the time to really read your file, here are some tips: Do not make the admission officer “work” to understand what you’re saying, especially in narrative sections like your essay. Be sure to take complex, genuine themes and word them clearly, organize them logically, and don’t cash in on the “5 cent” words. Write your essay in your own voice and strive to create a clear picture of who you really are as an applicant with every detail you add to your application.

### **Myth #3: SATs/ACT’s don’t count**

Are you familiar with the college rankings published annually by *U.S. News & World Report*? Well, an important factor of those rankings is the average SAT/ACT score for admitted students. Because of this, standardized test scores play a significant role in the application review process at most selective colleges. It’s up to you to do your research and interpret the range of scores of admitted students. Many schools use different statistics (i.e., middle 50%); therefore, you must sometimes read between the lines when assessing where your scores fall into this range.

If at the end of the day, the SAT or ACT is not your cup of tea, you may want to consider applying to a growing number of test optional schools. These schools make a decision on your application based on other factors like your grades, high school curriculum, and extracurricular involvement. [FairTest.org](http://FairTest.org) provides a comprehensive list of test-optional colleges.

### **Myth #4: It doesn’t matter if you apply Early Decision**

Early Decision programs give students the opportunity to apply to their top-choice college by November of senior year, and they will receive a response from the college about six weeks after that. Early Decision programs don’t just let you get the process over with sooner—they give you an important boost in the admission process. Why? Because Early Decision programs also require students to enroll in the college if accepted. No one wants to be known as a “safety school,” and Early Decision programs help admission officers determine which students are serious about attending their school. Before you apply Early Decision, just make sure you truly love the college; if you get in, you *must* enroll and won’t have the opportunity to apply to other colleges.

### **Myth #5: The admission process is just a means to an end**

Applying to college is not just about choosing a school; it’s about deciding:

- What are you interested in studying?
- Where do you want to live?
- What types of people do you want to be around?
- What kind of life do you want to have?

Whether or not you agree with a particular admission committee’s decision, going to college is your opportunity to grow socially and intellectually for four (or more) years. Ivy League or community college, public or private: with the right attitude, you will be successful and happy anywhere you decide to enroll. Just give yourself a chance to grow and you surely will.