

# What Matters In College Admission

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A look of surprise and encouragement washes over his face and with earnest he exclaims, “You mean that matters?” I am sitting in my school counseling office reviewing a high school senior’s college application, and I have asked why there is no mention of the hours he spends at home after school caring for his grandfather.

“Does it matter to you?” I prod. Undoubtedly it matters to his grandfather, and to the boy’s parents who work well into the evening every weekday. But for some reason, in his application, as the young man lists his involvement, writes his personal statement, and completes supplemental essays, there is no acknowledgment of this important way he spends his time, responsible for his elderly relative’s afternoon care. It is just what he does, part of his DNA, an inherent aspect of being part of his family and community.

This matters, as do many contributions that young people make, not to earn “points” for college admission or to impress others, but because it is what they have to do, or who they are, and a reflection of what they value. Applying to college can easily seem transactional—grades, test scores, school activities, athletics, volunteer hours—all external expectations of “selling” one’s self to an admission office. The irony is that colleges want to know who the applicant is, not just

what they do. Application reviewers also want to have context when evaluating students' academic achievement, like what other burdens or demands on their time exist.

Last month, the National Association For College Admission Counseling (NACAC) released their *2019 State of College Admission* report. It includes results from their Admission Trends Survey (ATS) of college and university admission deans about the importance of various aspects of a student's application in making admission decisions. The report reads, "The factors that admission officers use to evaluate applications from first-time freshmen have remained largely consistent over the past 20 years. Students' academic achievements—which include grades, strength of curriculum, and admission test scores—constitute the most important factors in the admission decision." This is to be expected, as admission offices want to be sure that applicants can be academically successful, however, these measures are deficient given what we know about how [predictive character attributes and social and emotional learning skills are to college and career success](#).

NACAC's report also highlights other important factors that colleges consider, including "the essay, a student's demonstrated interest, counselor and teacher recommendations, class rank, and extracurricular activities." Why do these additional criteria matter to colleges? Because admission deans need to have context for a student's achievement and ability to contribute to their college community. Richard Weissbourd is a senior lecturer and the faculty director of the [Making Caring Common](#) project and the co-director of the Human Development and Psychology Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He says, "Our second report on college admission, *Turning the Tide II: How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Distress in The College Admissions Process*, includes the [Dean's Commitment Letter](#), a pioneering statement endorsed by more than 140 college admissions deans that reinforces the value of contributions to family and community." Among other commitments, signatories affirm the following statements:

**"We will consider students' applications holistically. This means that we will not only consider students' grades and standardized test scores (if we require them) but will also consider other important attributes, including how they might contribute to our campus and society in meaningful ways. We are interested in what students have learned and want to learn, what they care about and why, and what they have done to pursue their interests and passions. We value**

**students who are authentic and honest in their applications."**

**"We pledge that family commitments and obligations, such as taking care of a younger sibling or working at a job to contribute income to the family, are highly valued by our admission staff and will be considered in admissions decisions. We encourage students to report these responsibilities in their applications."**

Gary Clark is the director of undergraduate admission at the University of California Los Angeles. He explains, "I often share with students that it's not the length of the resume that matters to us, it's the depth of commitment to the things that you do that stands out." He adds, "don't get boxed in to thinking that colleges only care about school-based activities. We want students who find activities and experiences that are meaningful to them (connected to school or otherwise) and really pour themselves into those things." Clark tells students, "Maybe you take care of a sibling or grandparent living at home, maybe you work part-time, maybe you're active in your faith-based community...whatever the case may be, we want to see that you are committed, responsible, and engaged because you care about what you're doing. Those are the students we want on our campuses."

Jonathan Burdick, vice provost for enrollment at Cornell University advises, "don't hesitate to report everything you do that's a meaningful use of your time." He adds, "the things applicants are most likely to avoid reporting are the mundane, critical, non-soloist-performance contributions that are valuable priorities in our review." Whitney Soule, dean of admissions and student aid at Bowdoin College agrees, saying, "What counts is what and how kids are learning - whether that is learning to manage a long commute to school, to function in a job, to commit to an activity, to help out family, learn a sport, or to cultivate a talent or a personal interest. They face personal challenges, cultivate friendships, and navigate responsibilities. Every student's experience is unique and it should be. We look to see what students have to show us and build that into our understanding."

Angel Pérez, vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College says, "Authenticity counts. What most students don't realize is that what we really want in an application is for students to share their true selves." He explains, "My favorite essay of all time was about a student who worked at a coffee shop. He talked about the lessons he learned - and in particular, that people in the service industry are invisible to many. He shared the lesson in a beautifully written essay and it really moved me. He brought his true authentic self to the application process. I learned a lot about his character and his values. These things matter deeply to colleges." Pérez adds, "bring your true self to the process."

How might applicants bring this true self, or communicate their values to admission offices? As Pérez and others recommend, college essays are excellent opportunities to share one's unique experiences or commitments. Often these attributes and contextual information are also found in counselor and teacher recommendations, so students should be sure to share these factors with the educators who are supporting them.

New this year in the activities section on the Common Application, students are able to choose “Family Contributions” from the drop-down menu. This is an acknowledgement by member colleges that these responsibilities are at least—if not more—as important as being the president of a school club or captain of an athletic team. Jenny Rickard, president and CEO of Common App says, “learning about your life outside of school — including life at home — is critical to how college admissions officers understand you as an applicant.” She adds, “we want to help students understand that there is real value in sharing how they spend their time, including taking care of family responsibilities, working to contribute to household expenses, caring for siblings or family members, and more.” Applicants can also provide a more detailed explanation of any special contributions or responsibilities in the “additional information” section of their application.

The college admission process can send a range of messages to young people about what matters as they look toward their future. While academic potential and extracurricular involvement are important foundational factors in this equation, they can often overshadow some of the less visible, yet equally significant, qualities of who applicants are and what they have to offer a college campus. These more subtle commitments to family and the common good are what build healthy communities, and that matters!