

Who's Getting In At Top Colleges?

By Jessie Brumfiel

Colleges used to prefer well-rounded students: the team captain who earned As, served on student government and wrote for the school newspaper. Today colleges want a well-rounded freshman class. Generally speaking, they look to fill their undergraduate 'portfolio' with high-impact students who each bring a specific talent to campus.

In particular, colleges want kids who:

Can do the academic work. Quite simply, the rigor of your high-school courses, grades earned, and SAT scores must demonstrate that you can succeed and contribute in the college classroom. This is the most important factor in your application. Stanford University, for example, estimates that three of every 10 applicants cannot do the work, and those students won't be admitted even with other admirable qualities.

Know themselves and their interests. Colleges want a diverse group of original kids, not a homogenous mass of copycats. Harvard's dean of undergraduate admission has said they look for "wonderfully lopsided kids." Successful students have developed distinct strengths. They will articulate an authentic passion or point of view, *and* demonstrate how they have cultivated that interest in their studies, work or volunteering.

Are leaders. Colleges today seek high-impact graduates - people who will later run companies or non-profits, invent things, find cures, run for office, and generally advance their field - whether that's history, the arts or popular culture. The best way to look like a future leader is to be a leader now. Start something, organize people, step up and take on real responsibility in your activities.

Can write well. College work depends heavily on strong writing skills. For that matter, the college application requires good writing skills. Colleges figure that students with weak writing ability will need to invest time improving this skill, and will have less time to blaze trails and make contributions to academic life.

Are great community members. Quite simply, selective colleges have a huge pool of qualified applicants from which to choose. They have no need to accept a student who seems arrogant, petty, close-minded, spoiled, selfish, or intellectually lazy. Colleges want kids who will be great roommates and great campus citizens. One highly-selective college rejected the nation's top high school soccer defender because he sounded like an arrogant jerk. Don't be that person!

Work well in groups and with adults. A lot of undergraduate work is built around group projects, experiments, lab research, discussions, or critiques. Also, colleges are launching many interdisciplinary programs - combining education and entrepreneurship, or medicine and engineering - so they need students with different backgrounds to work well together. They also seek students who will actively engage with their professors.

Getting in at a top college may be unpredictable, but it's not totally random. There are no tricks to mask a weak academic record or a lack of intellectual firepower and curiosity. It's true that recruited athletes, celebrities, children of alumni or major donors do have an edge at some schools and to varying degrees.

The best way to prepare for college admission success is to become the type of student top colleges want today.

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