

What does it *really* take to get into a top college?

During the past six years, many parents have asked me if I think their child will get into one particular college or another. Most of the time, I say I simply don't know. In many cases, no one knows for certain. Sad, but true, there is an element of chance that goes into the final college admission decision. On a brighter note, many factors are in one's control; therefore, with knowledge and diligence, the outcome is largely in the student's control. In this piece, I will list the "must have" factors employed by the most competitive colleges and universities in their all-important admissions decisions. Students must meet or exceed certain very high minimum standards in order to be considered seriously for admission to the 10 or so most selective schools like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, MIT, Stanford, Cal Tech, Chicago, and other equally selective universities.

A couple of comments here:

- A) Schools like Notre Dame, Northwestern, Georgetown, Carnegie Mellon, Vanderbilt, the U.S. Naval Academy, and similar schools which are generally ranked in the lower half of the top 20 or so are of similar quality to the schools mentioned above, but may be a fraction less selective in admissions;
- B) Programs such as The Schreyer School at Penn State, the Pitt Honors Program, and the graduate programs (such as Architecture) at Catholic University produce many graduates of ability and knowledge that are equal to those who have graduated from the "Ivies;" and,
- C) The "Ivies" are not suited perfectly for every student; moreover, (news flash), they are not universally desired by our students, many of whom have thrived at smaller, liberal arts colleges which have their own unique strengths.

However, if your child's goal is to attend one of the most prestigious and selective universities, the following will serve as a guide to the factors that *really* matter:

1. **Grades**: Though some college admissions offices say that they are willing to accept A's and a smattering of B's, the Ivies don't want to see B's. It is a given that you must have virtually all A's, because everyone else applying will definitely have A's. These A's must be achieved by completing the most rigorous course load available. The schools match the student's classes with the Aquinas profile to ensure that every day is full of challenging and competitive classes. In this regard, it is a mistake to believe that Aquinas students are disadvantaged by the rigor of our program and the need to really earn A's – colleges are very adept at distinguishing between stronger and weaker academic programs and valuing grades accordingly, and we have found that many students with B's from Aquinas still gain admission to highly selective schools because of the rigorous courses

- they have taken (and often the resulting higher AP and SAT scores they achieve as compared to A students from less rigorous schools.)
2. **SATs**: Absent some extraordinary athletic or musical talent, a student need not apply to an Ivy League school with an SAT score under 1500 (verbal and math). There are exceptions to this rule, but very few. In one case, the admitted student was homeless, living behind a dumpster, taking care of two siblings. That student did gain entry to a prestigious university with a mere 1390. The good news here is that a student can prepare for the SAT well in advance. If a student's composite Iowa score is below the 97th percentile (in the 8th grade), and an Ivy is desired, investing in a tutor is wise.
 3. **Hooks**: A "hook" in the college world means that one must be able to demonstrate, in concrete terms, what *sets that student apart from all of the other applicants*. In the college-counseling world, this is sometimes referred to as the "adopting a village in Africa" thing. A hook can be anything that is a stand out quality: from bird watching, to being on the U.S. Ski Team, to working with Habitat for Humanity during your vacations. Whatever your "hook" is, you must be dedicated, and you must be a leader of people in that particular pursuit. Publishing articles, attaining patents, and playing Carnegie Hall are examples of Ivy-League-level-hooks.
 4. **Extracurricular**: Colleges want to know what one does with his or her time outside of class. For most students, this is best demonstrated by participating in school-sponsored activities. Team sports are important to admissions people because they show the applicant is a strong competitor while still being able to "play nicely in the sandbox." Being able to play a sport for the school, or to participate in the school's symphony orchestra will increase your chances of admission, but only if your grades and SATs are high enough to warrant a look in the first place. Demonstrating a pioneering spirit by competing for a new school such as Aquinas has been very highly regarded by colleges. In addition, more is better: playing on three or four teams is far more interesting to the universities than playing on only one school team. Last year, in one instance, a school's scholarship committee gave an Aquinas student a second look because she was willing to play a new team sport (lacrosse) even though she was a senior. Turns out, she was awarded the scholarship. There was a time when you could be the lonely, shy kid and still gain entrance to the Ivies. Regrettably, with the rise in college shootings and suicides, it is now imperative that the student demonstrates that he or she navigated the social and community aspects of high school with aplomb.
 5. **Interviews**: In a recent article, I discussed the need to master the art of communication. Effective communication and conversational ease are *must haves* for entrance to top universities. Parents should provide "out of comfort zone" social interaction opportunities at the earliest age possible. If these opportunities are embraced, then when it really counts, the student will interact with that easy, comfortable grace which attracts people. I am confident that you know people who do this very naturally. A blown interview will always take the student out of the running for admission to a top school.

6. **Family Finances**: For easy entrance into an Ivy, family income must fall into one of two categories: very high or extremely low. If your family falls in between the extremes (most of us do), I recommend that you budget some resources to display your child's sincere interest in attending one of these highly selective schools. Examples of how your child can get the right message across are: make several trips to each school of interest; get to know people on campus; get names and emails of everyone you meet; sit in on lectures; meet with coaches; eat in the dining halls. These efforts show the admission team that the student is passionate about the school, and that your child will take advantage of every opportunity that comes his or her way. If your finances are on the lowest end of the spectrum, take heart. If your student is very gifted, then that child has an advantage because of your financial circumstances. Ivy League schools love to show that their student body is comprised not just of the privileged elite; but also includes "the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" students. A great way to impress a school is by showing ingenuity based on necessity.
7. **Connections**: If parents or grandparents are alums of a top school, the child is in a better admission position than most. However, legacy admissions these days are *far* from automatic. Many schools offer only one "ticket" to an alum's family. If you are not a legacy, then find alums who are still active with their alma mater. If an active alum is willing to write a detailed letter about a student describing how he believes the student will contribute to the campus, the student's prospects will improve. In a pool where applicants are equally accomplished, connections can make the crucial difference. In addition, experts say that it's the connections one makes at these schools that make the investment of time, money, and effort worth it. Going into a meeting years from now and hearing, "Of course, I know Sam. We went to Harvard together," the alum is set apart from his competition and enjoys an air of credibility.
8. **Teacher Recommendations**: A student must have extremely strong recommendations. Aquinas teachers are brilliant at this. The most common phrase that I hear from colleges is "your teachers *really* know your students." However, in order to receive one of these letters, it is important for the student to stay organized with each of the schools, and to be mindful of due dates for the teacher's letter. The student must inform the teacher of the student's activities and honors. If known, he or she must also inform the teacher of future plans (intended major or career). Teachers spend a great deal of time and effort writing letters for students; therefore, a thank you note should follow each recommendation.
9. **Awareness**: It is important for students to know what is happening in the world. Having a working knowledge of important political figures, world leaders, war, political unrest, economic developments, systems of government, natural disasters, commerce and markets, is required. Rest assured, the student's competition is aware. Time, energy, and study should be invested in order to familiarize oneself with current events. Cramming during the weekend before an interview becomes readily apparent to any interviewer. A student should also be prepared to answer any and all questions about his school, his family, and his desire to attend the college for which he is interviewing.

10. ***Presentation***: The college application season is not the time to begin experimenting with beauty, fad, and fashion. The mantra “stick with the classics” is paramount during this time. Hair and make-up should never distract from the person. So, males should keep their hair short, be clean-shaven, and wear something that resembles the Aquinas uniform. Girls should have neat hair, only a little make up, and something that resembles the Aquinas uniform. Also, there are times when interviews involve eating a meal. Long before the interview, a student should master good table manners. It is easy for interviewers to notice students who struggle in knowing which fork to use, and how to use it. This is no joke-- it’s critical.

Even if the student covers all bases on the aforementioned factors, admission to the *most selective* schools is never guaranteed. On the contrary, more qualified students are applying than ever, and the number of open spots has remained constant. This means that the probability of gaining admission to these schools has fallen over time. By no means do I want to discourage our students from aspiring to attend the nation’s most competitive schools.

On the contrary, we offer our kids a far greater chance of admission if they know how the process really works. Attention, by the student, to the recommendations set out in this candid guide to the “must haves” will provide highest benefit. Most importantly, employing the factors and tenets set out in this article will provide our students with the highest probability of admission into *any* college or university they desire to attend. This guide is relevant for all colleges, not just for the Ivies.

For further reading:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/moiraforges/2013/08/15/does-an-ivy-league-diploma-still-matter/>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/cameronkeng/2013/09/23/interns-from-ivy-leagues-or-private-schools-are-unwanted/>