



What is More Important in College Admission, Grades or SAT Scores?

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High school students and their parents are inundated with advice about college admissions. Everyone you speak to, it seems, has a theory on what is the most important factor in a student's chance of being admitted to **FirstChoice University**.

It is high SAT scores. It is being an athlete. It is community service. It is leadership. It is showing your passion. It is a wonderfully written essay. It is diversity. It is your major. It is the GPA.



The answer is—all of the above. With a caveat. The caveat is that almost nothing will be more important in the admissions decision than your transcript; your grades within your curriculum comprise the most important factor.

Although it feels like colleges are looking for ways to say no to your application for admission, they really are not. They are looking to see if you are a good fit for their institution. What do you bring? What will you contribute to our community? But before anyone on the admissions committee will get to the finer points of who you are and what you bring, they need to know that you are an academic fit—that you will be successful at their college. And the part of your application that gives them the most insight into this factor is your transcript.

Your transcript tells the colleges a lot about you and your grades speak with the loudest voice. They want to know what grades you earned in your classes. They will look carefully at the grades, the rigor of the curriculum and the trend. Are your grades on an upward trend or are they going down?

Colleges want to see that students have earned high grades in a challenging curriculum. By “challenging” they mean they want to see Honors, AP (Advanced Placement) or IB (International Baccalaureate) classes. They are less impressed with As in less challenging classes than B+ grades in more rigorous classes. Of course the most competitive colleges want to see As in the most challenging curriculum your high school offers.

Additionally, for some college majors, the grades in specific classes will give them insight into whether or not you are suited to the major you chose. You can be certain that if you are applying for an engineering major, your math and physics grades will be closely scrutinized.

Colleges will read your transcript and determine how rigorous your curriculum is within the context of what your high school offers. How do they know this? High schools send your transcripts to the colleges along with a school profile. The school profile gives the colleges information about your particular high school—how many students are in the graduating class, what percentage of these students go on to four-year colleges, if the GPA is weighted (and how), class rank, special programs and what classes they offer. The colleges will be able to see if your school offers Honors, IB or AP and if so, which classes. This is how they determine how much you have challenged yourself.

Earning high grades in a rigorous curriculum is more predictive of how a student will perform in college than standardized test scores and, therefore, is the most important factor in the admissions decision. Fortunately, this is an area in which the student has some control. Even if you did not start out in a rigorous curriculum, you can start challenging yourself and take more demanding courses at any point in high school.



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