

An Initiative of NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



# Changing Landscape of College Admissions

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## **OVERVIEW**

*Americans are reporting that they would like to see change in the college admissions process, particularly when it comes to the emphasis colleges place on factors other than academics. NORC at the University of Chicago's Higher Education Analytics Center asked questions on college admissions as part of an omnibus poll using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel. Previous recent polls have captured what Americans think colleges should consider in making admissions decisions; however,*

*none have asked what they believe colleges do consider **and** what they should consider, allowing for unique insight into those areas perceived as needing the greatest change – and those areas where most Americans think colleges are getting it right.*

## CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

In the last two decades, the college admissions process has changed dramatically. The number of students enrolling in postsecondary education has increased 30% since 2000,<sup>①</sup> and students are applying to more colleges than ever before. Over one-third of first-time freshmen submitted 7 or more applications in 2016; this is up almost threefold from 2000.<sup>②</sup> The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) has referred to this increase in college applications as causing a “growing burden”<sup>③</sup> on admission office staff. The average number of applications per admission officer in the fall 2017 ranged from 296 to 1,016 depending on school control, size, and selectivity.

There are mixed opinions regarding the cause of this steady rise in college applications. Many attribute it to the growing number of colleges accepting the Common Application, otherwise known as the Common App. With the Common App, students are able to complete one application that can be used universally by numerous institutions. As of the 2018-19 academic year, nearly 800

postsecondary institutions accepted the Common App,<sup>4</sup> and more than 1.5 million applications were submitted via this means by the November 1 early deadline.<sup>5</sup> However, other factors might be at play causing the rising tide of college applications as another analysis showed that application rates increased equally at schools that did and did not accept the Common App.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the cause of the increased volume of annual college applications, the result has been a decrease in acceptance rates at the majority of four-year institutions.<sup>7</sup> Couple the changes in application and admission rate behaviors with the rising cost of college,<sup>8</sup> and families are increasingly seeking assistance navigating college admissions and financial aid processes. Meanwhile, the availability of high school guidance counselors offering this type of assistance is dwindling and varies widely between private and public high schools. According to NACAC's 2018 State of College Admission, over two-thirds of private high schools had at least one dedicated college counselor, whereas one-third of public high schools had such support. Further, 47% of counselor time was spent on college counseling at private schools compared to 21% spent at public schools. With roughly 91% of high school students in the US attending a public high school,<sup>9</sup> the overwhelming majority have limited access to college counseling assistance. It is not surprising, then, that more families are turning to private counseling. These consultants, many of whom are former admission counselors at elite institutions, help to demystify the application and admissions process. A recent independent study estimates that 26% of high-achieving seniors<sup>10</sup> employed a private college counselor.<sup>11</sup> This demand for counseling support informs the 4.1% increase in the private counseling industry from 2013 to 2018 with revenue reaching \$2 billion.<sup>12</sup>

## CURRENT PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

Given this landscape and a recent, high-profile admissions scandal, <sup>13</sup> NORC at the University of Chicago's Higher Education Analytics Center (NORC-HEAC) sought to better understand the American public's perspective on the college admissions process and how this information might inform change. Questions on college admissions were part of an omnibus poll of 1,009 adults, conducted March 28 – April 1, 2019 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the population of all U.S. residents, 18 and older (see Methodology for more information). Overall, Americans are reporting that they would like to see change in the college admissions process, particularly when it comes to the emphasis colleges place on factors other than academics. Previous recent polls have captured what Americans think colleges should consider in making admissions decisions; however, none have asked what they believe colleges *do* consider and what they *should* consider, allowing for unique insight into those areas perceived as needing the greatest change.

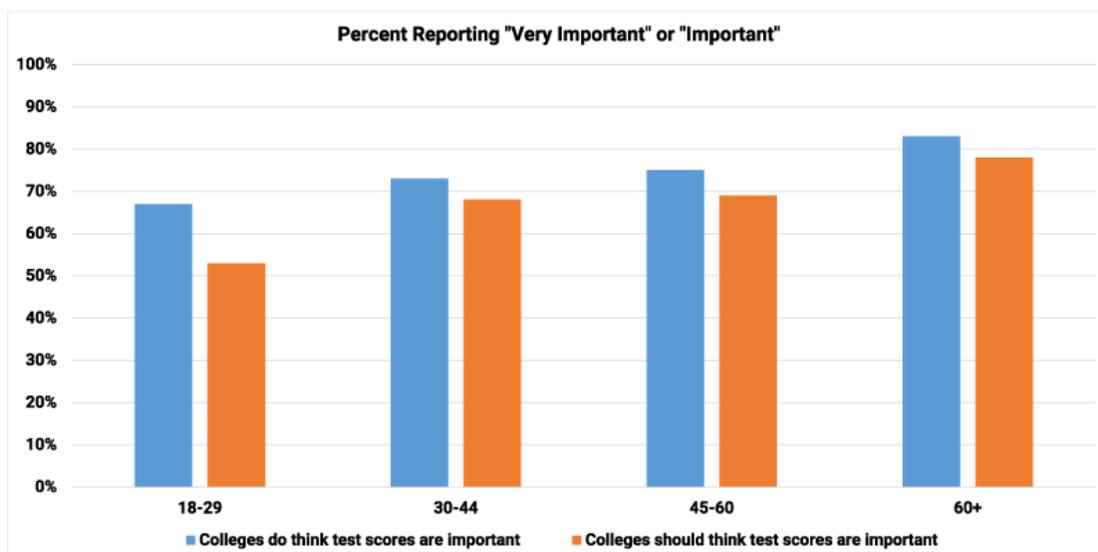
### Student Academics

The majority of Americans reported that high school grades are and should be the most prominent factor when evaluating an application. Overall, 81% responded that grades are *very important* or *important* in admissions decisions, and 76% reported they should remain *very important* or *important*. Just 2% reported they should be *not important* in evaluating an applicant. These figures are strikingly similar to how respondents to the NACAC 2018 State of College

Admission survey replied to a similar question. When asked about the importance of grades in admissions decisions, 81% indicated that grades in all courses are of *considerable importance* in admitting first-time freshmen; just 3% reported grades have *no importance*.

While the use of standardized test scores (e.g., ACT, SAT) in admissions decisions has been a well-debated topic, the majority of respondents to the NORC-HEAC survey reported support for their use. Overall, 75% responded that they believe test scores are *very important* or *important*, and 68% reported they should be *very important* or *important*. While respondents answered similarly regardless of income, race, or education level, age was a factor in response. Those who are 60 years of age or older were more likely to report the value of continued use of test scores when compared with younger respondents (see Figure 1). Interestingly, institutional responses to the NACAC study more closely resembled responses from 18-29 year olds in the NORC-HEAC study. Just over one-half (52%) of NACAC respondents indicated that test scores have *considerable importance* in admissions decisions, and 53% of 18-29 year olds in the NORC survey reported the SAT or ACT should be *very important* or *important*.

### **Figure 1. Percent Reporting Standardized Test *Is* and *Should Be* Very Important or Important by Age**



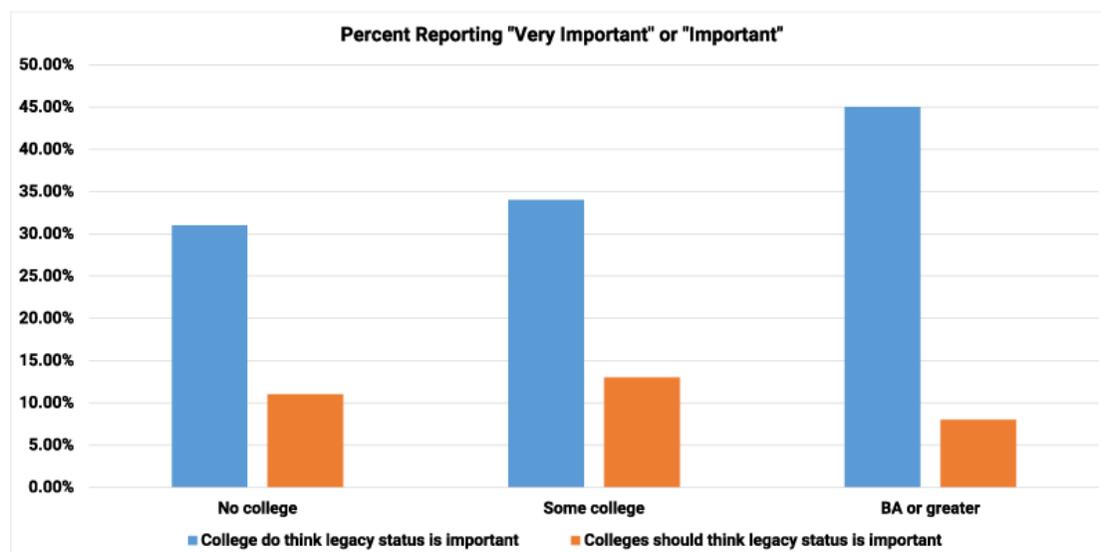
## Family Finances

Where respondents called for the greatest change regarded factors that seem to further favor the advantaged, including the financial wealth of the family and an applicant's legacy status. Respondents would like to see a family's financial wealth be less of a factor in admissions decisions – both in terms of donations made to the institution as well as a family's ability to pay full tuition. There was a particularly strong call for reducing the weight that is placed on a family donation made to the school when considering an applicant for admission. Overall, 44% believe donations made to the school are *very important* or *important*, however, just 13% think they should be, and 46% think colleges give weight to the family's ability to pay full tuition, while only 23% think that should be a consideration. Both race and education were related to responses to these items – white respondents and those with a bachelor's degree were more likely to report a need for change and were less likely to report that financial donations should be a valued criterion.

## Legacy Status

Another factor that tends to favor the privileged is legacy status. Over one-third of respondents indicated that they believe the legacy status of an applicant is *very important* or *important* to admission officers; however, just 11% believe it should be, and 50% believe it should be *not important*. Interestingly, those who have a bachelor's degree were significantly, by statistical standards, more likely to indicate the use of legacy needs to change and were less likely to indicate it should matter in admissions decisions when compared with those without a bachelor's degree (see Figure 2). Demonstrated interest on behalf of the student is a valued factor for many admissions offices. According to the NACAC study, just over one-half of surveyed institutions reported that legacy has some importance when evaluating an applicant.<sup>14</sup> Legacy applicants often have strong ties to the college, and with those strong ties comes a greater likelihood of enrollment and an increased yield for the institution.<sup>15</sup> When asked explicitly about alumni relations in the NACAC survey, however, just 13% reported it was *moderately* or *considerably important*.

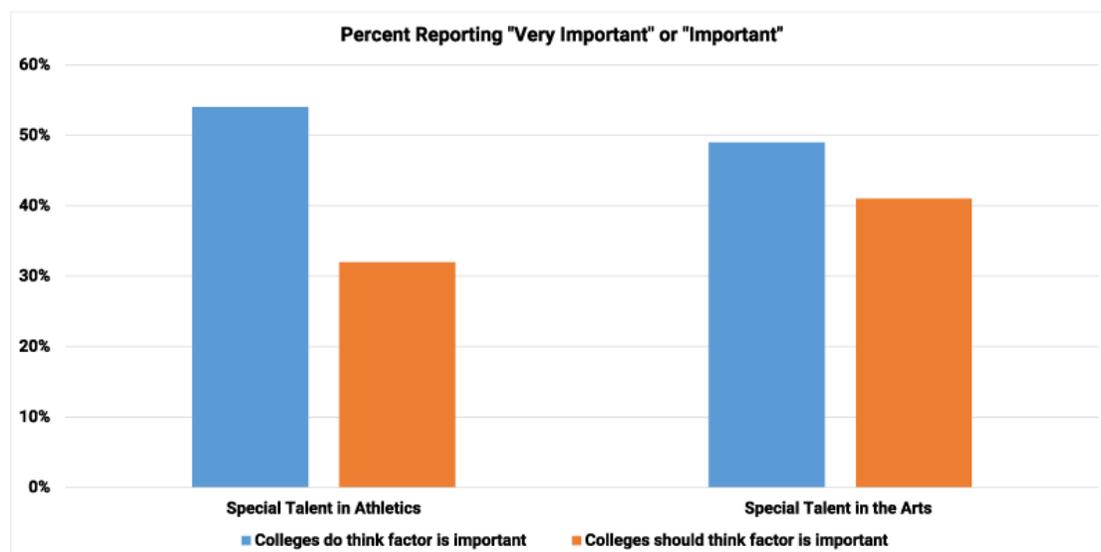
**Figure 2. Percent Reporting Legacy *Is* and *Should Be* Very Important or Important by Educational Attainment**



## Athletics

In addition to wealth and legacy status, elite athletes also are considered to be a privileged group when discussing admissions preference. At many institutions, student-athletes are admitted under special admissions criteria.<sup>16</sup> Male athletes, for example, in one NCAA athletics conference had an average SAT score that was 172 points lower than male non-athletes.<sup>17</sup> A little over one-half (54%) of respondents in the NORC-HEAC survey reported that they believe athletics talent is a *very important* or *important* criterion in admissions decisions, while about one-third believe it should be. While there is a significant and meaningful difference between how respondents believe athletics is considered and how it should be considered, it is noteworthy that still one-third believe athletics should be a prominent factor. Respondents, however, were more likely to endorse the use of special talent in the arts (music, acting, fine arts), compared to special talent in athletics, as important (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Percent Reporting Special Talent in Athletics & Arts *Are* and *Should Be* Very Important or Important**

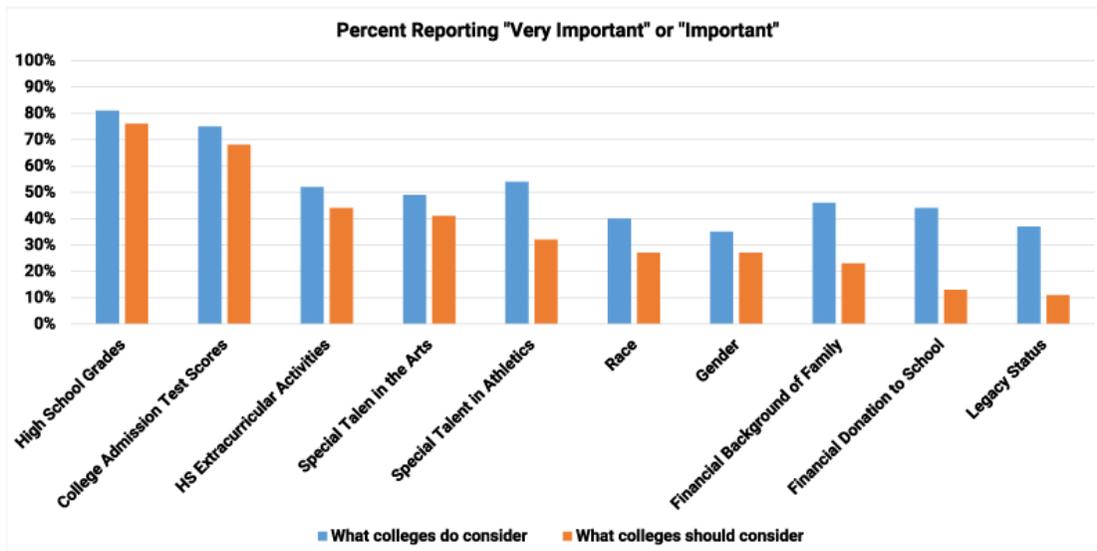


## Other Findings

The full set of factors included in the survey and respondent perceptions can be seen in Figure 4. Other key findings include:

- Beyond high school grades and test scores, Americans believe extracurricular activities in high school (such as debate team, 4H, student government) should carry the most weight of the 10 items asked on the survey. It is a distant third, however. Fewer than one-half (44%) believe extracurriculars should be *very important* or *important*.
- Just over one-quarter of Americans (27%) believe race/ethnicity should be considered when reviewing an applicant for admission. However, we noted strong racial differences in these opinions. Among both whites and non-whites, 40% believe colleges currently are using race/ethnicity as a consideration. 37% of non-whites believe this should continue compared with 22% of whites.
- Having children under the age of 18 was not a significant factor in respondents' answers.

### **Figure 4. Percent Reporting Very Important or Important in What College do Consider vs What they should Consider in College Admission**



## METHODOLOGY

Questions on college admissions were part of an omnibus poll of 1,009 adults, conducted March 28 – April 1, 2019 using a sample drawn from NORC’s probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the population of all U.S. residents, 18 and older. Two parallel questions were:

1. How important do you think these applicant factors are to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications?
2. Now, how important do you think these applicant factors should be to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications?

Each question offered the same 10 applicant factors, which are listed below, and were answered with a five point scale: Very important, Important, Moderately important, Slightly important, and

Not important.

1. High school grades (such as GPA)
2. College admissions test scores (such as SAT, ACT)
3. Extracurricular activities in high school (such as debate team, 4H, student government)
4. Special talent in sports / varsity athlete
5. Special talent in the arts (such as music, acting, fine arts)
6. Racial background to ensure diversity
7. Gender to ensure diversity
8. Legacy status – an older family member of the applicant graduated from the college
9. Financial background – the applicant will be able to pay full tuition
10. Financial donation made to the college by the applicant's family

The survey included respondents from an online survey and a phone survey (both landline and cell phone). Interviews were offered in both English and Spanish, but all respondents completed the questionnaire in English. To achieve an unbiased assessment of respondents' views on the importance of the 10 different college admissions factors, the survey questionnaire presented them in a random order to each respondent.

The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.3 percentage points, incorporating a survey design effect of 1.91. All estimates have been adjusted by survey weighting, with weights calculated to reflect probability of selection of households and individuals within them. Then estimates are adjusted to align with population totals for age, sex, education, race/Hispanic ethnicity, housing tenure, telephone status, and U.S. region.

## About The Higher Education Analytics Center

The Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC leverages our more than 50-year commitment to and extensive experience with higher education to offer effective, affordable research and data collection to institutions of higher education and other related organizations. Specifically, we deliver the data and insights necessary for these institutions' continued functioning and improvement. We approach all work with deep technical expertise, a spirit of collaboration, and a commitment to scientific integrity. Our services range from large-scale cross-sectional and longitudinal data collection and analyses, to individualized consulting on discrete issues that can be addressed by data analytics. We also provide consultation on evaluation methods and data collection design. Learn more at [heac.norc.org](http://www.norc.org/about/departments/pages/higher-education-analytics-center.aspx) <<http://www.norc.org/about/departments/pages/higher-education-analytics-center.aspx>>

## About NORC

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