

Riley Baker Educational Consulting

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November 2013

2nd—SAT Reasoning and Subject Exams

Seniors – File Early Decision/ Early Action applications

Work on remaining college applications

Register for a PIN at www.fafsa.ed.gov if you'll be applying for financial aid

December 2013

7th—SAT Reasoning and Subject Exams

(register by 11/8 - late registration 11/22)

14th—ACT and ACT With Writing (register by 11/8 - late registration 11/22)

Underclassmen—Review PSAT report with advisor and map out a plan for test preparation

Schedule spring SAT/ACT testing dates

Seniors—File any additional college applications before deadline dates

What Do Colleges Want?

Each year, colleges and universities use a number of criteria to decide which applicants to admit. Although the weight placed on these may differ, most schools will consider the following, in order of importance:

Grades: Grades are *always* the single most important factor in the admissions decision. Colleges want students who will succeed in college-level work. High school grades are the most reliable predictor of how a student will perform in college so they are always the place that admissions officers begin when reading applications. The focus will be on high school grades in core academic courses: English, math, science, social studies, and foreign language. Grades from junior year and first semester of senior year classes receive the most scrutiny. Although a record of strong grades throughout high school is preferred, colleges do note when a student's grades have improved over time. On the other hand, a downward trend in grades is also noted and viewed unfavorably. Even so, there are college options for *all* students, from straight A students to late bloomers.

Challenge of the student's high school curriculum: Along with grades, the quality and rigor of the courses a student has taken in high school are considered. Colleges prefer students who have sought out academic challenge. The most competitive applicants will complete at least four years of each of the core academic subjects, rather than loading up on non-academic electives. Colleges also like to see a curriculum that becomes progressively more challenging. Because of their rigor, *successful* completion of AP, honors, and IB courses, or dual-enrollment courses, are viewed positively by admissions committees. They signal that a student hasn't shied away from academic

challenge, and can be an indication of the student's ability to be academically successful in college.

However, this doesn't mean that every student should rush to load up on AP and honors courses, or even take these courses at all. Some students can handle a full slate of AP courses, while for others, a few rigorous courses in areas of academic strength is more appropriate. For still other students, a challenging college prep curriculum without AP or honors courses is the appropriate choice. The key word is *appropriate*.



Colleges also understand that the number of AP and honors courses available varies from school to school. If your school offers only a few, or no, AP and honors courses, colleges won't expect you to have taken what isn't available. On the flip side, when you attend a high school which offers a wide variety of

AP and honors courses, colleges will have a different expectation. In such cases, when appropriate, make every effort to fit a few AP and honors courses into your junior or senior year schedule.

College Entrance Exams: Colleges consider college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT to offer *objective* and *standardized* measures of aptitude and achievement. Colleges use test scores to compare applicants from high schools all across the country. As a general rule of thumb, very large universities rely more heavily on test scores than do smaller schools. However, about 800 colleges and universities are *test-optional*, meaning they do not require standardized test scores or downplay their importance in making admissions decisions. It's also important to note that even the best entrance exam scores will **not** overcome lackluster grades in your high school courses. **Grades are always more important than test scores.**

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Subspecialties of Neuroscience

Neuroscientists may choose to specialize in a variety of areas

- **Neurobiology**—studies the biology of the nervous system
- **Neuroanatomy**—studies the structure (anatomy) of the nervous system



- **Neurochemistry**—studies the chemistry of the nervous system, such as how neurotransmitters work
- **Neuropharmacology**—studies the action of drugs on the nervous system and on behavior
- **Neuropathology**—investigates the diseases of the nervous system, such as Alzheimer's, stroke, and multiple sclerosis
- **Neuropsychology**—studies the relationship between the brain and behavior, especially as related to thought
- **Neurophysiology**—studies the electrical responses of the nervous system

Majors: Neuroscience

Neuroscience is the study of the brain and nervous system, with an emphasis on how the nervous system affects human behavior. Neuroscientists are interested in understanding how the human nervous system develops and functions throughout life, and seek to find ways to prevent or cure neurological disorders. Therefore, neuroscience draws from many different areas of study including biology and the life sciences, chemistry, psychology, physics, and biomedical engineering. Although it has connections to the social sciences and humanities, neuroscience is firmly based in the laboratory. It is there that neuroscientists study the relationship of the brain to behavior, the biological basis of thought, and how memories are stored or lost. It is topics such as *Why addiction occurs*, *How can we help nerves to regenerate?*, *What causes depression?*, and *How can we treat pain?* that consume the interest of neuroscientists.

Although many universities have neuroscience departments, even at the undergraduate level, many neuroscientists have gotten their initial training in areas such as biology, pharmacology, physiology, or psychology. Typical introductory courses in this major include general and organic chemistry, math including calculus and statistics, physics, psychology, and general biology. More advanced courses may include neurobiology; cognitive, developmental and systems neuroscience; behavioral and evolutionary neuroscience; neuropharmacology. Although undergraduate programs may allow for a concentration in one area of neuroscience or neurobiology, it is at the graduate level that most of the specialization occurs. Thus, most neuroscience majors go on for an M.D. or Ph.D. degree, or both. In choosing an undergraduate program, look carefully at the course offerings to determine the empha-

sis of that school's neuroscience program and to see if the courses in its major correspond with your interests.

As a neuroscience major, you'll develop skills that are applicable to many career areas. Some of these skills include:

- Laboratory and research skills—designing experiments and recording and reporting results, operating scientific equipment, applying scientific theory to real-world problems
- Critical thinking and analytical skills—creating new ways of looking at problems and finding solutions, analyzing data and drawing conclusions
- Communication skills—interacting effectively with other members of your team, utilizing different forms of media to present findings
- Organizational skills—working both independently and as a member of a team towards a goal, identifying and applying resources toward solving a problem

While research careers in the neurosciences generally require graduate degrees, some undergraduate majors go into teaching, journalism, nursing, psychology, radiology, or medical technology. They may also pursue a variety of alternate career paths in areas such as biotechnology, public health, social science research, and consulting. Others pursue a medical degree to become practicing neurosurgeons or psychiatrists. Still others will focus their graduate studies and life work on one of the subspecialties described in the sidebar to the left.

To learn more about this rapidly expanding field, explore the website of the Society for Neuroscience at www.sfn.org.

Financial Matters: Maximizing Merit Aid



Have you ever wondered what you can do to improve your chances of getting merit aid from a college?

An intriguing study from the University of Rochester in New York may hold some clues. Jonathan Burdick, their Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, analyzed the characteristics of students who received merit awards from Rochester. He looked at specific applicant characteristics to see which ones make a difference in the size of a student's merit scholarship offer:

Rigorous high school courses. For every AP, IB, or Honors course a student took in high school, his or her merit award at Rochester increased an average of \$400.

Grades in core academic courses. Every "A" grade in a core academic course in high school translated into an extra \$62 of merit money.

Test scores. For every 10 additional points students scored on the SAT, they received an average of an extra \$115. For every 1 point on the ACT composite, they earned an average of \$425 extra in merit money.

Interviewing. Students who scheduled an admissions interview with the University of Rochester received, on average, \$250 more in merit money. Students who pro-actively kept in touch with admissions and financial aid—even *after* they were admitted—were likely to receive an average of \$3,000 *more* in merit money.

Teacher recommendations. Every teacher letter of recommendation that the admissions committee rated as "excellent" correlated with an average of \$1,800 more in merit awards.

Being on time. Students who had all parts of their application into admis-

sions on time (including mid-year grade requests) earned an average of \$400 more in merit money.

Applying for financial aid. Regardless of their *actual* financial need, students who filled out the FAFSA and CSS Profile financial aid applications received, on average, \$2,500 more in merit money.

Geographic diversity. Out of state students received an average of \$2,000 more in merit money at Rochester than in-state students.

Burdick's data were specific to the University of Rochester, and in sharing his findings, he was careful to point out that some of the differences were not by conscious design. Still, students hoping for merit scholarships at other colleges would be wise to take these findings to heart. Grades, high school courses, test scores, teacher recommendations, and personal contact with colleges don't just matter to your admissions chances; they may very well make a difference in how large a scholarship you are offered when admitted.

What Do Colleges Want? (continued from page 1)

Academic Recommendations: Many colleges ask for recommendation letters from teachers and the school counselor describing the student's academic potential and personal characteristics. These are used as an assessment of the applicant's potential and to help add dimension to the rest of the application. Teacher recommendations receive the most weight in admissions decisions. They should be from teachers who have taught the student in eleventh and twelfth grade core academic subjects. Colleges do understand that at many high schools interaction between students and counselors is limited. Thus, colleges place less emphasis on counselor recommendations. For the best letters, however, make the effort to get to know your teachers and school counselor!

Personal Characteristics: After the above factors are considered, colleges

will also consider each applicant's personal characteristics. Their goal is to create an interesting and diverse campus community. They look for evidence that a student can deal with setbacks, has been a good citizen, and is self-motivated and intellectually curious. Extracurricular activities will be considered to get a sense of students' interests, talents, and how they may contribute to campus. Finally, colleges also want their student bodies to represent different races, ethnic groups and cultures, economic backgrounds, academic interests and geographic regions. Admissions officers will often consider the diversity that applicants will add to campus in making admissions decisions.

Other Factors That May Be Considered: Many colleges now consider the applicant's level of interest in attending

their institution. They seek students who have demonstrated that they are likely to enroll if admitted, as evidenced by students visits to campus, interacting with admissions reps at college fairs and during visits to high schools, and, in many cases, by the level of familiarity with the institution that students shows in their essays.

Another factor that may be considered by some colleges is the applicant's ability to pay for the cost of their education. While some colleges are truly "need blind" in making admissions decisions, recent economic conditions have pushed other colleges to take the amount of financial need a student might have into account when making admissions decisions. At these colleges, being able to pay "full freight" – or close to it – can give a small advantage to a particular student.

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The Personal Interview

Unlike a job interview, it's rare for a college interview to be the deciding factor in a college's admission decision. A great interview won't make up for undistinguished test scores or a mediocre transcript; however, a really good interview can tilt the scale in your favor. A successful interview is a conversation between two people who genuinely want to learn more about each other. Following some of the suggestions below can help make your college interview a success.

First, dress appropriately. It's hard to go wrong with preppy dress; save the more daring outfits to wear when you're a student. Neat and well-groomed, you'll come off as confident and assured.

Next, do your homework. Admissions officers spend much of their day answering the same superficial questions over and over. Read any printed material from the college (including the student newspaper) and revisit the college's website before your interview. Forget the obvious; ask questions that show you've thought seriously about this particular college and why it is a good fit for you. Questions about stu-

dent involvement (or apathy) or campus issues are appropriate. Think, too, about why you're interested in attending—special programs they offer, unique opportunities for learning, interesting clubs and activities. Be ready to explain why you believe you are a good match.

Be prepared to talk about yourself in an articulate and engaging manner. Avoid one word answers – this is a conversation, not a monologue. You'll want to answer some of the interviewer's questions in depth. You may be asked about your goals, your major area of interest, about activities you love, experiences that have been most significant to you, a book that influenced your thinking. Run through a practice session with a parent or friend beforehand, so you have a chance to try out your responses and get some feedback.

Within a few days after your interview, write a brief, handwritten note to your interviewer, thanking him/her for both time and interest, and mentioning something you discussed that was helpful to you. Polite and articulate, you'll leave your interviewer with a favorable impression.