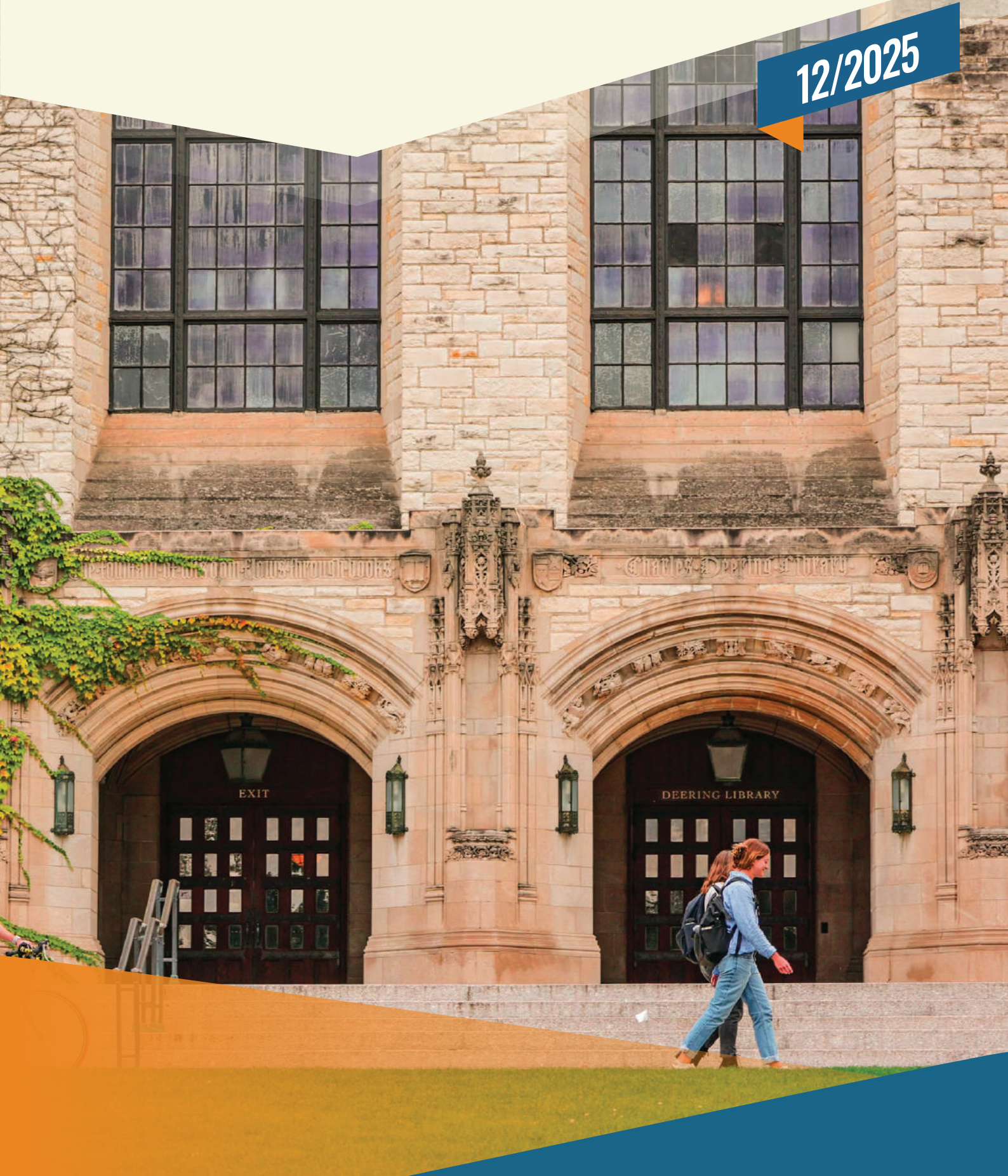


# SPARK PREP NEWS

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# SHOULD YOU CHOOSE A MAJOR BASED ON TRENDS?

It sounds like a simple question, yet it carries a great deal of anxiety for many students and families:

- ▶ If I choose a 'popular' major, will my future be more secure?
- ▶ If I do not actually enjoy that 'popular' field, can I still do well and succeed?
- ▶ The major I like is not very popular. Is it worth pursuing?
- ▶ Should I play it safe and choose fields that are always in demand, instead of following my interests?

At Spark Prep, we often tell students that choosing a major is not about getting it right in one single decision. It is about choosing a path that gives you room to grow along the way.

A major is not the final destination. It is a starting point. It is where you begin learning about yourself, building self-direction, practicing responsible decision-making, and developing a mindset of lifelong learning.

Drawing from well-known career guidance frameworks such as Career Construction Theory, Life Design, and Holland's Theory, a sustainable career path should always start with self-understanding. The major or career you choose needs to fit who you are and where you are in your current stage of development.



## A “good-fit” major often lies at the intersection of:

- ▶ The individual: strengths, values, interests, learning ability, personality.
- ▶ The world of work: labor market needs, real-world application, long-term employment trends.
- ▶ Realistic opportunities: financial capacity, family context, development opportunities, and job prospects in the field and location you plan to work in.

## So, should you choose a major based on trends?

Spark Prep encourages students to stay informed about career trends and to use that awareness to prepare and develop strategically. At the same time, we want to remind you that the labor market changes rapidly, and no one can confidently predict which fields will be in demand by the time you graduate and enter the workforce. Any field can become “popular” at a given moment.

More importantly, instead of asking, “What should I study or do to get a job?”, consider asking deeper questions:

What kind of life do I want to build? How do I see myself in five to ten years, or even further ahead? What does happiness and success mean to me, on my own terms?

A major alone cannot guarantee a successful career. What truly shapes a sustainable career is how you learn, live, and grow through each stage of study and work. No matter which field you pursue, you will always need:

- ▶ Lifelong learning skills
- ▶ Adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges
- ▶ Critical and creative thinking
- ▶ A professional mindset rooted in responsibility, integrity, and care

Think of choosing a major as an ever-expanding opportunity rather than a fixed commitment. It is a space where you can explore multiple perspectives and pathways toward your goals, allowing you to adjust your plans when necessary while still staying grounded in a clear sense of direction.

In the end, trends are just one element on your “career exploration map”. When your choices are informed, intentional, and aligned with your values, interests, abilities, and circumstances, and when you remain serious and persistent in learning and self-development, you will be on a path toward real growth. Once you have grown enough, you will always have the ability to adapt, no matter how the world changes.

If you are still feeling lost in the process of choosing a major, do not rush yourself to find an immediate answer. Give yourself time to research, explore, experience, and reflect. And start with the most important question of all:

“What truly matters to me?”



# CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT GETTING IN. IT'S ABOUT **FINDING A PLACE** WHERE YOU CAN FIT IN

For many students and families, the first step in building a college list often starts with opening a ranking table. When asked why a particular university is on the list, the answers are usually familiar:

- ▶ Because it's well-known.
- ▶ Because it ranks highly.
- ▶ Because someone we know studied there and is doing very well after graduation.
- ▶ Because everyone dreams of the Ivy League, so those schools must be the best.

## These reasons are understandable, but they are not enough

The idea of a “good” university is often subjective and heavily influenced by reputation and media visibility. In reality, the U.S. alone has more than 4,000 institutions offering undergraduate programs. Many excellent universities remain under the radar simply because they are less talked about. As a result, they are often excluded from the “good schools” category by default. The truth is quite the opposite. There are hundreds of strong universities worth exploring. When students invest time and effort into research, they often discover that they have far more good options than they initially thought. So do not limit your opportunities to only the names everyone already knows.

## More importantly, think about “fitting in,” not just “getting in”.

- ▶ Getting admitted to a university does not guarantee that it is a place where you will truly belong. Some students are accepted into highly prestigious institutions, only to realize soon after enrolling that the mismatch is too great academically, socially, or personally.
- ▶ Studying at a “top” school does not automatically lead you to the right destination. Many students graduate from lesser-known universities and still build fulfilling, successful careers on their own terms.

Choosing a university is like choosing a travel companion for a long journey. Reputation may catch your eye at first, but fit is what allows you to stay, feel supported, and genuinely grow.

## So what does a “good” or right-fit university look like for you?

There is no fixed formula, because each student has different priorities. What matters most is identifying what truly matters to you. At Spark Prep, we often encourage students to prioritize factors beyond rankings, such as:

- ▶ Academics: Is the curriculum flexible? Are there majors or minors you are interested in? Are professors approachable and accessible?
- ▶ Environment: Are there communities, clubs, or groups where you can feel a sense of belonging?
- ▶ Educational philosophy and values: What does the school emphasize? Innovation? Academic rigor? Community service? Practical training? Does that align with what you are looking for?
- ▶ Student life and support: Can you picture your daily life there? A big city or a quieter area? Climate? Internship and job opportunities?

Answering these questions requires both self-understanding and thoughtful research into each institution. Over time, your judgment will become clearer and more accurate. Give yourself enough time to refine your goals and adjust your plans as reality becomes clearer.

## Common Misconceptions and Important Notes When Building a College List

### 1. Replace “Is this university good?” with “Is this university good for me?”

Focus on schools that align with your academic profile, goals, abilities, and personality, rather than relying on generalized opinions. A university’s name or rank does not define its fit. A small liberal arts college can offer rich and meaningful experiences. A school that works well for someone else may not be right for you. Balance all factors with a clear, personal perspective.

### 2. “Only graduates from prestigious universities have an advantage in jobs or graduate school.”

This is not entirely true. As university quality becomes more evenly distributed and many institutions demonstrate distinct strengths, employers and admissions committees no longer evaluate candidates solely based on school name. What matters most is how you perform and grow during your undergraduate years. Strategic students choose environments where they can learn well, develop fully, and stand out. Long-term success depends far more on personal qualities and outcomes than on brand names.

### 3. “Good schools are always hard to get into,” or “There are only one or two perfect schools for me.”

In reality, there are many good schools for you. With proper research, you will uncover excellent options that are often overlooked. Highly prestigious schools are usually more competitive, but a school that fits you well may be more accessible than you expect. No university is perfect. Each has strengths and limitations, and attractiveness varies by student. Your goal is not to find a “perfect” school, but to thoughtfully build a list that fits your needs and priorities.

### 4. “Universities always admit the best students.”

This is also a misconception. Just like the idea of a “good” school, defining a “top” student is complex. Admissions decisions are influenced by many factors: academic programs, grades, transcripts, extracurriculars, geography, talents, and more. There is no flawless or fixed formula.

Some admissions officers even admit that if they reviewed the same pool of applicants again, they might make different decisions. A rejection does not reflect your failure or shortcomings. Your success in college depends far more on attending a school where you can leverage your strengths, be challenged academically, and gain a meaningful learning experience. With good preparation, you will have multiple suitable options. Make sure your final list is balanced in terms of selectivity.

### 5. A strong college list is not just about easing anxiety about acceptance.

**It is a list where, if admitted to any school on it, you would genuinely feel excited to enroll.**

- ▶ Reach does not mean unrealistic
- ▶ Target does not mean ordinary
- ▶ Safety does not mean a last resort

When you clearly understand what you want to study, the environment you need, and prepare your application thoughtfully, every option on your list has value.

Once you are satisfied with your list, ask yourself:

- ▶ “If I were accepted to all of these schools, which one would I choose?”
- ▶ “If no one were judging my decision, where would I most want to study?”

Your answers reveal a great deal about your true interests, personal values, and how well you understand yourself.



# DO YOU NEED TO BE “ONE OF A KIND” TO SUCCEED IN COLLEGE APPLICATIONS?

Have you ever sat in front of your screen, scrolling through a feed filled with messages like “Be unique or be rejected,” and quietly sighed to yourself: “I’m just too ordinary”?

In reality, being “unique” does not mean doing something no one has ever done before. It certainly does not mean being unusual for the sake of standing out. What matters far more is what is ‘authentically distinctive’ about you: your values, motivations, and the way you have grown through your experiences.

So what does that look like in practice? Let’s take a closer look at a few Spark Prep student cases.

**Case 1.** A student pursuing Computer Science, involved in small-scale community activities, often taking on people-focused roles such as human resources and team coordination within student clubs. Passionate about coding, the student consistently self-studied and voluntarily taught newcomers what he learned. No large competitions. No high-profile projects. Yet these experiences led to admission to a Top 30 U.S. university with over USD 60,000 per year in financial aid.

What made this profile unique?

Systems thinking and a builder’s mindset. There were no flashy achievements, only the ability to turn personal passion into a foundation that supported others. This is a quality many universities value deeply.

In the essay, the student reflected on a shift from working alone to collaborating, designing communication systems within teams, learning how to manage conflict, and aligning people toward shared goals. For technical students, uniqueness does not have to come from products alone. How you collaborate, analyze problems, create processes, and positively influence others matters just as much.



**Case 2.** HA student involved in volunteering, fundraising, supporting local communities, assisting the school administration office, and organizing summer camps for their religious community. In the essay, the student shared the experience of ending a friendship due to peer pressure, a decision that later caused deep reflection. That moment became a turning point, motivating the student to reclaim personal values, stop letting others define their life, seek healthier communities, and serve as a way to rebuild themselves.

### What made this profile unique?

Emotional honesty and clarity of values. Admissions officers saw a young person who could say “no” to what felt wrong, acknowledge mistakes, take responsibility, and stand by what they believe in. The story was not dramatic. It was reflective, sincere, and grounded in personal growth. That imperfect story led to a near-perfect outcome: acceptance to 17 out of 17 universities applied to in the previous admission cycle.

**Case 3.** A student deeply involved in volunteering through teaching, fundraising, and environmental work, while also balancing family responsibilities. Cooking, baking, sports, and piano were long-term interests. The student also excelled in debate and created TikTok content around topics they cared about.

The essay focused on caring for a younger sibling with a serious illness, and the moment the student realized that love became the compass guiding every decision, helping them endure challenges and move forward.

### What made this profile unique?

A spirit of service and compassion, the ability to put others first without diminishing personal leadership. Awards and achievements served only as a backdrop. What truly stood out were perseverance, kindness, and meaningful impact on those around them. The uniqueness came from depth of commitment, not the number or scale of activities.

**As you can see, simply by being yourself, you already carry abundant “unique” material, which can be explored through:**

- ▶ Personal perspective: the same activity can mean very different things to different students
- ▶ Growth trajectory: turning points, changes, and lessons along the journey
- ▶ Concrete impact: numbers and measurable outcomes matter, but people matter more
- ▶ Value consistency: what you think, believe, and do reflects a coherent and authentic identity

**Universities are not searching for strange or never-before-seen elements. They care more about whether:**

- ▶ You understand who you are
- ▶ You show your process of growth
- ▶ You express your values through actions and storytelling

**When preparing your application, ask yourself:**

- ▶ Who am I, and what values guide me?
- ▶ Does my application come together as a story with a clear theme?
- ▶ Is there a moment of transformation in my essay?
- ▶ Is my voice honest and truly my own?

So instead of worrying that you are “not special enough”, begin by seeking the best and most authentic version of yourself. That, in itself, is already more than enough.

# HOW ADMISSIONS OFFICERS EVALUATE APPLICATIONS AND HOW YOU CAN LEAVE A STRONG IMPRESSION?

Have you ever wondered: “What will the admissions officer think when reading my application? What do they look at first? Do they really read every line?”

Understanding how admissions officers work and what they are truly looking for can help you tell your story more clearly, authentically, and strategically. This article addresses some of the most common questions students have about the admissions review process.

## Q1 — What are “highly selective colleges,” and why are acceptance rates at these schools declining?

“Highly selective” typically refers to colleges with low acceptance rates, often below 30%. These schools represent only a small fraction of all universities, yet they strongly influence admissions standards and trends.

In recent years, application numbers have surged due to factors such as the convenience of the Common App, the growing preference for long-established prestigious institutions, and applicants applying to more schools overall. As a result, acceptance rates at many of these colleges have dropped significantly.

### Tips:

- ▶ Do not focus only on big-name schools. Build a balanced college list with reach, match, and safety schools based on your priorities and fit, including admit rates, program strengths, regional preferences, and scholarship opportunities. Only about 2% of U.S. colleges fall into the “highly selective” category. You still have many strong options worth considering.
- ▶ Use each school’s Common Data Set to understand the profile of a “typical admitted student.”

## Q2 — What do admissions officers look for in an application?

- ▶ Academic foundation: Grades, course rigor (AP, IB, A-levels, etc.), number of advanced courses, and standardized test scores if submitted. This is the baseline that determines whether your application is eligible for further review.
- ▶ Institutional priorities: Many factors are beyond individual control, such as geographic diversity, first-generation status, legacy considerations, demand for specific majors or skills, and class composition goals. These priorities vary by school and by admissions cycle.
- ▶ Holistic elements: Essays, extracurricular activities, recommendation letters, and evidence of your character, motivation, and values. Together, these form a cohesive, compelling, and distinctive application.

An admitted student is often not “the best” in isolation, but the one who best fits the school’s overall needs and priorities in that particular year.

### Q3 — What does the application reading process look like?

- ▶ Many schools use rubrics or evaluation frameworks aligned with their institutional goals.
- ▶ Applications are often reviewed by region, with officers familiar with your school context and educational environment.
- ▶ Early stages typically involve quick screening. Many schools use Committee-Based Evaluation - a two-reader system (a regional reader and a second reader), spending only a few minutes on each file at first. Applications that do not meet academic thresholds are often filtered out quickly. Recommendation letters are usually reviewed soon after.
- ▶ For viable applications, committees work collaboratively to select the final admitted pool, considering all components: activities list, portfolios (if applicable), main essays, and supplemental essays.

**Tips:** Admissions officers are often looking for reasons to say “yes.” Your job is to identify that reason and communicate it clearly.

### Q4 — Common mistakes admissions officers notice quickly

- ▶ Keyword stuffing: Overusing phrases from a school’s mission statement without genuine connection to your personal story.
- ▶ Over-polished applications: Perfect on paper but lacking authenticity.
- ▶ Basic spelling or formatting errors: These are often significant drawbacks.
- ▶ Lack of demonstrated impact or depth: Listing activities without showing outcomes, learning processes, or personal growth.

Overall, preparing a college application should be a long-term journey, not a last-minute sprint. Starting early, prioritizing deep research and authenticity, breaking tasks into manageable stages, and maintaining strong discipline will help you navigate a process that inevitably includes uncertainty and factors beyond your control, while still maximizing your chances.



# DO SAT/ACT SCORES STILL MATTER IN A TEST-OPTIONAL ERA?

The short answer is: many colleges no longer require standardized test scores, but that does not mean SAT or ACT scores have lost their value.

## Here is why they can still matter:

- ▶ For students with a less competitive GPA or transcript, SAT/ACT scores can serve as a strategic supplement, helping demonstrate academic readiness and learning potential for college-level work.
- ▶ For students with strong GPAs, solid SAT/ACT scores can be the cherry on top, strengthening an already competitive profile, especially if your score falls within the school's middle 50% of admitted students.
- ▶ Some institutions and programs still require test scores. Schools like MIT have reinstated test requirements, and certain majors, particularly STEM and engineering, as well as specific scholarships or Honors Programs, may still expect SAT/ACT results. In these cases, having test scores can clearly enhance your chances.

## When should you seriously consider submitting SAT/ACT scores?

- ▶ When you are applying to highly competitive programs or top-tier universities with acceptance rates below 30%.
- ▶ When you come from an educational environment with limited access to international curricula or academic resources, such as smaller cities or less advantaged regions. In these contexts, strong standardized test scores can help validate your academic ability and potential. Similarly, test scores can help offset a weaker GPA or transcript.
- ▶ When applying for scholarships or Honors Programs. Always check requirements carefully, as some of these programs still consider SAT/ACT scores mandatory or highly influential.

## Tips for preparing for standardized tests:

- ▶ **Start early.** Ideally, complete your standardized testing by Grades 10 or 11 so your final year can be focused on building a thoughtful, well-rounded college application.
- ▶ **Identify early which test suits you better,** SAT or ACT, and plan your preparation accordingly. Take advantage of super-scoring policies when available, and schedule test dates strategically. Avoid excessive retakes that could disrupt your academic balance or mental well-being.
- ▶ **You do not need a "perfect" score.** A score that is above average relative to the applicant pool is often sufficient. Allocate your time wisely across all parts of your application.
- ▶ **Understand each school's testing policy.** Learn the differences between Test-Blind, Test-Free, Test-Recommended, and Test-Flexible policies, some of which allow alternative test results beyond SAT/ACT. This knowledge helps you make informed preparation decisions.

► If **standardized tests are not your strength**, and all your target schools are truly test-optional, it may be wiser to skip testing and focus on areas where you can shine more clearly.

**Finally, remember: standardized test scores are not everything.**


The decision to test or not should be made within the context of your overall application strategy. A high SAT/ACT score cannot mask a weak transcript, a scattered activity list, or a flat essay. Admissions committees care far more about how you have learned, grown, and challenged yourself over several years than about the result of a single exam taken over a few hours. That said, a strong test score placed within a cohesive, well-prepared application can become a powerful boost to your chances. Use your time wisely, invest thoughtfully in both your application and standardized testing, and choose the strategy that truly serves your journey.






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