Is your student’s heart set on studying computer science at MIT or earning an economics degree from Stanford? Have they imagined themselves pursuing international relations at Tufts or majoring in global business at USC?

**IF SO, YOUR STUDENT IS FOCUSED ON THE CLASS OF SCHOOLS TYPICALLY REFERRED TO AS “HIGHLY SELECTIVE.”** Of the approximately 3,500 accredited colleges and universities in the U.S., only about 100 (around 3 percent) are considered highly selective. These schools typically have admission rates of 10% or less. This means that gaining admission to any of these schools is extremely difficult, even for high-performing applicants.

Early results show that highly selective schools may be even more competitive in a post-pandemic world. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these schools implemented test-optional policies, making them accessible to more potential applicants. Without the requirement of test scores, students who may have struggled with testing but have a strong GPA, class rank, and extracurricular/community service involvement were more likely to apply to highly selective colleges.

We encourage you to remember that there are many other fabulous schools your student should consider—colleges that might even be a better fit for them despite being less selective. With that said, here’s everything you need to know about college admissions to highly selective colleges and universities.

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**4 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN CONSIDERING HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGES**

1. **Have I taken (and received mostly A’s in) the most rigorous courses my high school offers?**
2. **Am I ranked in the top 5-10% of my high school class?**
3. **Does my resume demonstrate depth of initiative and impact?**
4. **Do my college essays highlight my unique intelligence, curiosity, and perspective through deep reflection?**
WHAT MAKES A COLLEGE SELECTIVE?

The simplest way to define selectivity is by the percentage of applicants who are admitted to a college. The lower the percentage, the more selective the school is. The Common App has made it easier for students to apply to many colleges, leading to a huge increase in applications to top schools, which has resulted in lower and lower acceptance rates. These top colleges will enroll approximately 100,000 of the roughly 3.25 million high school seniors this spring—about 3 percent.

There are also a number of schools that are extremely selective because they have specialized programs for a specific type of applicant. This category includes schools like Juilliard, which is focused on admitting students who demonstrate excellence in the performing arts and require student auditions as a key part of the application process. Service Academies like West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy require applicants to pass a fitness assessment and receive a nomination from their representative in the U.S. Congress or Senate.

WHAT HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGES WANT TO SEE FROM APPLICANTS

Top colleges evaluate candidates using a holistic review, which means they consider every aspect of the application, from test scores to extracurricular involvement to special accomplishments—and everything in between. By evaluating a student’s application from a holistic perspective, the college gets to know applicants as people, not as numbers.

Here’s what admissions officers at highly selective colleges are looking for in their holistic review:

STRONG ACADEMICS

Grades and strength in curriculum carry the most weight in admission to highly selective schools. Excelling in core academic areas (English, Math, Foreign Language, Science, History) will typically qualify an application for a second read (i.e., a more in-depth examination by a full-time admissions reader rather than a temporary, seasonal reader hired by colleges to manage the number of applications). For more on how colleges interpret a student’s transcript, check out our blog post.

4 REASONS FOR DECREASING ACCEPTANCE RATES AT TOP COLLEGES

1. Math: The denominator (the number of applicants) at elite colleges is rising while the numerator (number of spaces available) remains largely the same. This was particularly true for students applying for Fall 2022 admissions, with the lack of testing requirements vastly increasing the number of student applications.

2. Cultural Norms: Distance from home is no longer a factor. Students are choosing where they apply based on criteria like innovative programming and the student body rather than distance to home.

3. Marketing Games: Colleges buy more than 80 million student names and contacts from the College Board and then market aggressively to students and their families. The result? Students who have little chance of acceptance are encouraged to apply and colleges can improve their rankings due to the lowered acceptance rate.

4. Technology: With the growth of the Common Application, it’s become much easier for students to apply to schools even if they are unlikely to attend.

Source: Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions, Jeff Selingo
What does that mean, in practice, for your student?

- Earning high As in their high school classes. Of course, being valedictorian doesn’t make your student a shoo-in, but it can certainly help.
- Taking the most rigorous courses offered at school (e.g., Honors, AP, and IB courses)
- Having a GPA in the top 5-10% of their high school class (only if the high school uses rankings; this is not held against the student if their high school does not rank).

**TEST SCORES**

In the last two years, a majority of highly selective colleges offered flexibility in their standardized testing requirements: students could still be considered for admission if they were unable to submit test scores due to complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the rise of test-optional admissions, test scores do remain a factor in college admissions at most highly selective universities. However, as colleges continue moving toward test-optional admissions, we have seen a decrease in the importance of test scores overall. We expect this trend to continue, though an excellent test score never goes out of style.

Keep in mind, without standardized test scores as a metric for evaluation, highly selective colleges learn more heavily on an applicant’s academic accomplishment, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to social good.

**DEPTH OF RESUME**

Once your student has met the high academic threshold, maintaining a depth of involvement in activities is the next critical step. This is an incredible opportunity for your student to stand out from the pack. For the purposes of highly selective admissions, students should be most concerned with initiative and impact — these two areas tend to set students apart in the application process.

Whether it’s music, athletics, an academic interest, an independent project, community service, art, creative writing, or entrepreneurship, your student’s extracurricular involvement and the impact they make can make a difference in admissions, especially when paired with exceptional academics.
While interest and involvement are necessary first steps to extracurricular engagement, in order for your student to be considered at highly selective colleges, they’ll need to take initiative and demonstrate impact. Of course, often, an activity’s most significant impact is the one it has on the student themselves—never discount this personal impact, especially because it often makes for a stand-out essay topic.

**A COHESIVE AND THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION**

A great college application highlights a student’s interests and achievements as a cohesive and narrative arc. It should tell a story of who the student is and what they value. The activity and awards section should be complemented by the essays so an admissions reader comes away feeling like they understand the “why” behind a student’s involvement.

Great essays, in which a student provides authentic reflection rather than a summary of their resume, are vital. For example, let’s say a student gave a TED talk and listed this accomplishment on their resume and application. Rather than writing an essay describing the achievement of giving a TED talk, your student might instead reveal how they grew interested in the topic in the first place. The goal is to showcase your student’s personal experiences and unique perspective.

To underscore this trend, *this article in Business Insider* reveals that Stanford admissions readers will mark an application “standard positive” if the student is a solid candidate who makes a positive impression academically but doesn’t stand out. To be a competitive candidate at highly selective college, it’s not enough to just be “standard positive.”
WHAT DOES “DEPTH” MEAN IN HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVITIES?

Participation is great, and we encourage it throughout high school in areas of a student’s interest. To increase that engagement, we’ve developed a model that we call the i4 framework. Our i4 framework is simply a structured way for students to increase their engagement in areas of INTEREST, by increasing INVOLVEMENT, taking more INITIATIVE, and measuring the IMPACT.

For the purposes of highly selective admissions, we are most concerned with INITIATIVE and IMPACT because these two areas tend to set students apart in the application process.

INITIATIVE. Demonstrating initiative often involves starting with an idea and then taking steps to make it a reality. Traditionally, we might think of initiative as founding a club or starting a new school program. And while those and other formal leadership roles certainly do the trick, we encourage students to think even bigger. The key is to turn ideas into actions, no matter the context, and create something that you can pursue further (e.g., present, teach, publish, etc). Here are a few examples of high-level student initiative we’ve seen in recent years:

• Researching, writing, publishing, and promoting a book on a topic of specific interest
• Developing a college-level course on a specific subject as an independent project and presenting research to the faculty at a local college
• Starting a successful business
• Showcasing photography on a blog and gaining thousands of followers
• Creating a summer coding camp for underprivileged children
• Landing a prestigious internship at a major cancer center
• Launching a history travel vlog and gaining thousands of followers
• Developing and organizing a brand new event, such as a fundraiser, in an area of interest
• Writing and producing a play that is performed at school
IMPACT. To identify what impact your student is having, ask yourself: “What is different because of my student’s involvement/ideas/questions?” Revisiting the examples of initiative, let’s look at what their impact might be:

- The book won a literary award, and the student was interviewed by journalists as a subject matter expert
- The student’s research was published in an academic journal
- The business expanded and the student hired several employees
- The student’s photography won a national award and/or was featured in a national newspaper or magazine
- The student expanded the camp to three additional neighborhoods by securing a grant and hiring student counselors
- The student was the only high school student included on a research team that came up with a new discovery published in a national medical journal
- The vlog caught the attention of a TV producer who hired the student for a new TV series
- The event raised over $100,000 and became an annual signature program for the nonprofit
- The play generated excellent reviews and was picked up by a regional theater company

While interest and involvement are necessary first steps, in order for your student to be considered at highly selective colleges, they’ll need to take initiative and demonstrate impact.
STAND-OUT ACADEMIC COMPETITIONS

The Common App devotes an entire section to academic awards—a clear hint that academic achievements are highly valued. However, highly selective colleges aren’t only looking for high-achieving students; they also seek a student body that is academically curious and intellectually interested. Here are a few places your student can look for competitions and opportunities to demonstrate mastery and depth:

1. PRESTIGIOUS SCIENCE COMPETITIONS: This site lists the top competitions in science, from the Intel ISEF to the Google science fair.

2. ACADEMIC COMPETITIONS: This list, compiled by Johns Hopkins, includes a huge number of prestigious competitions, in every category—from quiz bowls and multidisciplinary contests to art, history, journalism, creative writing, math, and science.

3. VISUAL ART COMPETITIONS: This list of prestigious visual art awards and this list of photography competitions compiled by CollegeVine will help artistic students identify avenues of formal recognition.

4. MUSIC COMPETITIONS: Musically-inclined students can receive national recognition through the National High School Music Theater Awards, music composition competitions, or music competitions through American Protégé. State-level recognition is also valuable.

APPLICATION STRATEGY: EARLY DECISION VS. RESTRICTED EARLY ACTION

There are a number of important strategic considerations to make when thinking of applying Early Decision (ED) or Restricted Early Action (REA) to highly selective colleges. When students ask us whether or not they should apply ED to a college, our answer is always “it depends.”

Here’s what your student should consider when trying to determine if applying ED or REA is the right choice.

EARLY DECISION (ED1 AND ED2): For better or worse, we live in an early decision world. Many highly selective colleges, including
Vanderbilt, Pomona, Emory, Johns Hopkins, and Northwestern fill nearly half of their incoming classes through the early decision pool. And for many schools, the acceptance rates can be significantly higher during the early decision round of admissions.

Our good friends Jeff Levy and Jennie Kent, compile an annual spreadsheet showing the admissions rates for Early Decision as well as the percentage of the class filled with these early applicants. Analyzing the ED multiplier (the ratio of ED to RD acceptance rates) of colleges on this spreadsheet can be a smart strategy for students trying to decide between applying early to two highly selective colleges that they equally love. For example, if their two top choices were Dartmouth and Northwestern, with 3.8 and 3.5 multipliers respectively, applying ED at Dartmouth could potentially increase their chances of admission since a student is 3.8 times more likely to be accepted ED than RD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Name</th>
<th>Early Admissions Rate</th>
<th>Overall Admissions Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartmouth</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School reported data, hosted at College Data

If your student is in love with a school and is absolutely certain it is where they want to spend the next four years, it may make sense to apply Early Decision (ED). But it’s not a decision to make lightly: If they are accepted ED, they are legally bound to go to the school (unless the financial aid offer is too low to make the school affordable). Additionally, because admitted students are required to attend, they are less likely to be recipients of merit scholarships.

ED2 (with deadlines in January rather than November/December) became a big factor during the class of 2019 admission cycle at schools like WashU and Vanderbilt, and this trend has continued to grow. Last year, Johns Hopkins added an ED 2 option for students and many colleges are following suit.

The downside to applying ED is that your student won’t be able to weigh financial aid offers from different schools and negotiate higher offers.

INTERVIEW AS PART OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Many colleges ask students to interview as part of the application process. These schools use evaluative interviews with an alum or admissions officer to gain a stronger grasp of a student’s personality, strengths, weaknesses, and goals.

There are two basic kinds of college interviews:

**Evaluative interview:** helps the institution assess the student as a candidate. The interviewer speaks with the student, takes notes, and reports all impressions to the admission committee.

**Informational interview:** Provides the student with information about the institution.

Colleges vary in their procedures when it comes to interviews. Interviews of either kind can take place on or off campus. Some ask you to set one up after you’ve applied and they’ve begun to process your application. Others may ask you to indicate on your application whether or not you’d like to have an interview.
RESTRICTIVE EARLY ACTION AND SINGLE CHOICE EARLY ACTION

Some elite schools use REA and SCEA application deadlines. For example, Harvard, Stanford, and University of Notre Dame utilize the former, while Princeton and Yale utilize the latter. While applying using these application deadlines can give the applicant a small boost, applying REA and SCEA doesn’t give applicants the same bump in admission chance as ED does. That’s something to think carefully about because, when they choose REA/SCEA, your student gives up the chance to apply ED1 at another school (although they may be able to apply ED2 at schools that offer that option if they don’t get accepted to their REA/SCEA school).

It’s worth analyzing statistics when thinking about applying REA. For example, Stanford’s REA acceptance rate for the class of 2020 was 9.5% vs. 4.69% for regular decision candidates. Yale, on the other hand, admitted 17% of SCEA applicants and 6.27% of regular admission applicants. So if your student was equally smitten with Yale and Stanford, applying SCEA to Yale would statistically yield much better odds for admission.

As colleges can change their early admission policies, it’s important to check and double check before choosing an early option that may prevent or limit other early or regular applications. If your student has found the place where they’re sure they will thrive academically and socially, we’re happy to help you strategize the best early option.
KEEP IT ALL IN PERSPECTIVE

One final note: We understand the lure of the elite school, but we urge parents to understand the reality of the current admissions landscape and encourage their students to look at a wide variety of schools. We never discourage anyone qualified from aiming high—we love that!—but a narrow focus is also limiting. We encourage you to tour a variety of colleges as you’re coming up with your student’s college list.

In his book *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be*, New York Times columnist Frank Bruni puts the whole crazy college ride in perspective:

“People bloom at various stages of life, and different individuals flourish in different climates. For every person whose contentment comes from faithfully executing a predetermined script, there are at least 10 if not 100 who had to rearrange the pages and play a part they hadn’t expected to, in a theater they hadn’t envisioned. Besides, life is defined by setbacks, and success is determined by the ability to rebound from them. And there’s no single juncture, no one crossroads, on which everything hinges.”
The team at College MatchPoint has developed a set of tools and resources to help students and families successfully navigate the college admissions process. We are committed to helping all students thrive in their selected college, and the first step is reducing the stress of the admissions process for students and parents alike.

With that in mind, we’ve used our team’s expertise—developed over years of working with students, parents, and college admissions officers—to create a library of free resources that you can use as you navigate the college journey.

WWW.COLLEGEMATCHPOINT.COM

FREE RESOURCES

Guide to Engagement in High School: The i4 Framework
The most successful college applicants have engaged in activities that are based on their interests, aptitudes, and motivations. This guide presents our i4 framework and walks you through how your student can optimize their interest, involvement, initiative, and impact to successfully engage during high school and develop into a strong college applicant.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE

Guide to Demonstrated Interest
Demonstrated interest is the degree to which you show a college that you are sincerely interested in attending their school. It has become an important, subtle tool that colleges use to efficiently and accurately enroll a specific target number of students each year. This guide offers tips on showing demonstrated interest no matter your personality type, and we provide some examples of emails and conversation starters to use with admissions representatives.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE

Guide to Summer Planning
For many of today’s college-bound high school students, the summer is no longer nine weeks of total relaxation, but rather an opportunity to spend time actively working, learning new skills, or diving deeper into an area (or areas) of interest. This complete guide to summer planning walks you through the various types of summer opportunities—from volunteer work to independent projects, and everything in between—and offers tips for how your student can take their involvement up a notch during the summer.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE

Guide to Informational Interviews
This worksheet will help your student prepare for their informational interviews. It offers space to jot down potential questions and provides structure for taking notes during the interviews and following up after.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE

Guide to Campus Tours
Touring colleges can be a great way to get a feel for what a specific school is like, but because these visits are brief, it’s crucial to go into them prepared. In this guide, we provide a college tour checklist, a list of not-to-be-missed campus destinations, and tips for making the most of your college visits. With this guide in hand, you can focus on taking advantage of this special time together with your student.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE

Guide to Exploring College Majors
Choosing a major is an exciting journey, and it’s one to go into prepared—the choice of major will not only determine what they study for the next four years, but also has the potential to impact the rest of the student’s likelihood of admissions to many schools. This guide offers suggestions for how to navigate the process, important stats about majors and their career tracks, information about how a major choice will affect your student’s high school years, and much more.

DOWNLOAD THIS GUIDE