

# Woolf College Consulting



## THE GOODS ON GETTING IN

*Knowing how the system works is the first step to finding the best school*

By Betsy F. Woolf

When Charles Dickens named his classic *Great Expectations*, he wasn't thinking about getting Pip, his hero, into college. But he could have been. Nowadays, there's so much hype surrounding college admissions – whether it's marketing by the colleges themselves or reporting by the media – that parents and students *expect* the process to be overwhelming. But it needn't be if you have the right expectations beforehand.

### **Expectation: The school record counts more than a standardized test.**

Standardized test scores are important at many colleges, but the main focus in admissions is the high-school transcript. Colleges put everything into context: the student's GPA, the school that he or she attends, and the strength of the student's high school schedule. For example, Jenny goes to "A High," a very competitive high school where her GPA is a 3.0. Her school offers 14 advance placement (AP) classes, and by the end of senior year, she will have taken six of them. Marc attends "B High," and his GPA is close to a 3.5. But he has only taken one of the 10 AP classes offered in his school, which is much less competitive than "A High." Although Marc's GPA is higher than

Jenny's, she's a stronger college candidate because she has taken a more challenging curriculum.

**Expectation: SAT and ACT scores don't count – sometimes.**

While the majority of schools in the U.S. still consider standardized test scores in college admission, a growing number of schools are “test optional” – a student does not have to submit the results of an SAT or ACT to be offered admission. The number of such schools is around 700 and includes some fine institutions, such as Bates College, Bowdoin College, Dickinson College, Drew University, Franklin and Marshall College, Hamilton College, Lawrence University, Muhlenberg College, Pitzer College, Sarah Lawrence College, Wake Forest University, Wheaton College (MA) and Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Some schools may require the submission of a graded writing sample instead of test scores, and others, like NYU, Middlebury College and Connecticut College, give students options as to which tests to submit, which can even include AP exam scores. You can find a full list of these “test optional” schools at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).

**Expectation: Most students get in.**

Yes, the University of Virginia accepted just 31% of its applicants this year (2010) and Harvard less than 7%, but the overwhelming majority of colleges accept more than 50% of their applicants. The increased selectivity at schools like these has a drop-down effect, raising the credentials and academic strength of less-selective schools.

**Expectation: One application may be all it takes.**

Close to 400 schools allow students to apply via one universal application called the Common Application, and 85 schools accept the Universal College Application. Boston College is a “Common App school,” and so are George Washington University, Occidental College, Rice University, and the University of Chicago. The system isn't perfect. Many colleges also require submission of a supplement unique to that college, which can mean filling out some additional information or writing another essay or two. And many state colleges

and universities still use their own applications. You can view the lists of colleges that accept the Common and Universal Applications at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) and [www.universalcollegeapp.org](http://www.universalcollegeapp.org).

**Expectation: APs are better.**

Parents often complain that they can't get a straight answer to the question, "Is it better to get an A in a regular class or a B in an AP or Honors class?" The answer is that it's better to take the more rigorous class and get a decent grade (a B or better). As I indicated earlier, colleges want to see students challenge themselves.

**Expectation: GPAs aren't static.**

Colleges know that it takes some students a while to mature, and that's often reflected in their grades. So just because your son or daughter's grades weren't up to par freshman year doesn't mean his or her college chances are doomed. Admissions counselors read transcripts carefully, and they like to see an improvement in grades from year to year. That can have more impact than the GPA number alone.

**Expectation: It's all about junior year.**

An upward grade trajectory is one reason why junior year has become so important, since it is the last time that colleges will view a student's full academic year. Another reason is because so many students are applying early to colleges. With many early applications due around November, the colleges can't get much background about senior-year academic performance. That places extra emphasis on junior year.

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