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June 16, 2010

2010 Edition: What Colleges Are *Really* Looking for in Applicants

Fairfax, VA - The 2010 survey of independent college consultants has now been released, revealing this year's "Top Ten Strengths and Experiences Colleges Look for in High School Students." While several items topping the list are unchanged despite the overheated college application process, there are a number of changes to the overall list as some items have made IECA's list for the first time, others have fallen in importance, and a number of things that families believe to be critical don't get anywhere close to making the list. The survey is conducted every few years, completed by hundreds of members of the Independent Educational Consultants Association.

As has been true for more than five years, a student's academic performance in high school tops the list. Most important is a rigorous academic curriculum that challenges the student. While grades are important, educational consultants believe that demonstrating a willingness to challenge oneself is more important. Additionally, IECA members felt that grades need to show an upward trend—mediocre grades in the freshman year can be overcome by demonstrating that better grades came with maturity. According to IECA members, colleges want to know what type of student will be arriving on campus—not who the student was four years ago.

According to IECA Executive Director Mark Sklarow, "What we learn most in viewing these results is that students should shy away from efforts to change themselves into what they think colleges seek and learn to promote the best thing about themselves: whether that's a willingness to challenge themselves in a difficult course, demonstrating passion for a particular subject, committing themselves to community service, or demonstrating leadership. Students should seek to make their application reflect the best of who they already are."

"Solid SAT or ACT scores," reflecting a consistency with academic achievement was #3 on the list. IECA members felt that terrific standardized tests are rarely enough to secure admission at a more competitive school, but poor scores can be difficult to overcome.

The importance of the essay moved up since the last survey, perhaps reflecting the essay's role as more colleges move to 'test optional' status. The essay was also seen as more important to private liberal arts colleges, as compared to large state universities.

Debuting on this year's list at #8 is "demonstrated leadership in activities." Much has been discussed in recent years about colleges seeking students who will contribute in a meaningful way to campus life. The appearance of this on the IECA list underscores this growing desire. "Demonstrated intellectual curiosity" (#9) remains an important item, particularly with those schools with more competitive admissions.

Rounding out the top ten is "demonstrated enthusiasm to attend," an item that first appeared on the IECA list just a few years ago. This would reflect the college admission office concern over their yield: wanting to offer admission only to those who seem serious about enrolling. Just missing the top ten list: "financial resources" (despite the economy) and "out of school experiences." This latter item fell off the top ten list, although "special talents and abilities" (#7) remained.

There has been considerable buzz in the admission community in recent months about the trend toward creative applications with videos or other unique components, but this placed far down, well out of IECA's top ten list. Also relegated to a status of far less importance by IECA member educational consultants were several items thought by the general public to be important to decision-making: the personal interview, being a legacy (family member of an alumnus), and demonstrations of responsibility as being far less important in the current admission climate.

The [full list](#), just released, can be found at www.IECAonline.com/college.html. This list offers great advice for families looking to understand the nature of college admission and is also used by school districts and many others. Additional information on the IECA Web site includes [advice on visiting college campuses](#) and [making the most of the summer before senior year](#).

IECA was founded in 1976 as a nonprofit, professional association of established educational consultants. IECA member educational consultants are professionals who assist students and families with educational decision-making. Their educational backgrounds, specialized training, campus visitations, and professional experience equip them to help students choose schools, colleges, or programs that meet their individual needs and goals. Membership in the association requires consultants to meet IECA's professional standards and subscribe to its Principles of Good Practice. Members continually update their knowledge and maintain skills through IECA-sponsored meetings, workshops, training programs, and information exchanges with colleges, schools, programs and other consultants.

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