

How colleges really make admissions decisions

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Shrouded in mystery, the college admissions process often leaves students and parents puzzled as to why some gain admittance while others receive the dreaded rejection letter. Most colleges say they review applications holistically, taking into account a student's grades, test scores, essays, recommendations and activities. But do they really?

A new study from Rachel Rubin, a doctoral student in education at Harvard University, sheds light on the admissions process at the nation's elite colleges, which admitted record-low numbers of students this year. Rubin found that when it comes to selecting an incoming freshman class, some schools are much more holistic than others. Rather than whittling down the pile of applicants by GPA or SAT scores, Rubin found admissions officials at some of the 75 elite colleges and universities she surveyed (who were granted anonymity) use a much more vague measure called "institutional fit" to decide who gets in and who doesn't.

This approach, used most commonly by liberal arts colleges and competitive private universities, focuses on non-academic qualities and favors underrepresented minorities and students who demonstrate exceptional talent, according to Inside Higher Ed. To a much lesser degree, colleges also consider recruited athletes, the likelihood a student will enroll and a student's fundraising potential.

"Contrary to public opinion, selective institutions are highly systematic with regard to their admissions processes and practices within individual institutions," Rubin writes in the report.

"However, there is a great deal of inconsistency across institutions, potentially creating the illusion that student selection is arbitrary."

While the majority of schools Rubin surveyed did in fact make the initial admissions cut based on grades and test scores, 21% made the first cuts based on student essays, recommendations and specific questions of whether applicants were expected to thrive at the college. In an interview with Inside Higher Ed, Rubin said she thought the colleges made cuts based on non-academic merit because the vast majority of applicants already had sufficiently high academic credentials.

Fonte: Time, 12 Apr. 2012. Disponível em: <<http://www.time.com>>. Acesso em: 13 Apr. 2012. On-line.