

College Admissions Counselors Answer the Questions You Need To Know



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Here at Student Voice, we've spent the month of September focusing on the college application process. We know that reaching out to admissions counselors can be daunting, so we took questions, submitted by high school seniors around the country, and reached out to admissions counselors for their thoughts and answers! You can read out their answers from the University of Minnesota, Xavier University, and University of Washington to some frequently asked questions below!



1. I know that grades count but is it better to take hard classes and have lower grades than easy classes and high grades? Essentially, what do you look at when you look at grades?

U of Minnesota: “Our competitive and strongest applicants are the students who are taking the most rigorous classes and doing well in the coursework. We are looking for students who challenge themselves and are prepared for the rigor on campus. We are also looking to see that the student can actively engage and understand the workload that they are capable of handling. This means that if a student knows that a subject area is particularly difficult for them, knowing the steps they need to take in order to be successful in the class. This can mean balancing their coursework if they know they are not going to be successful in an advanced level in the course”

Xavier: “When we look at a transcript we take all aspects of a student’s GPA into account. We look at rigor of classes, grade trends, weighted and unweighted GPA, and the number of honors or AP courses offered/taken by the student. We like to see student’s push themselves academically, but it is still important that they maintain a good GPA. In my opinion, it is not worth it to take an advanced class if the student thinks they can only manage a D. Seeing rigor on a transcript is best when a student can take on that challenge and still maintain their GPA.”

U of Washington: “The University of Washington looks at the GPA in context. We are taking into account the 9–11th grade unweighted GPA, however we are counting and assessing what advanced level courses (AP/IB/College in High School) the applicant took.”

2. Are the short essays for certain schools that ask about you more so to get to know you or do they actually play a big part in your acceptance?

U of Minnesota: “We do have open optional statements that students are able to expand on their educational interests, their contribution to diversity, and awards/talents and achievements. They are utilized to help aid in the admissions process in that it helps to elucidate a student’s unique experience and can better indicate whether a college is a good fit based on their academic interest. As part of the holistic review, these statements are utilized as secondary factors within the

review and would not singularly determine a student's admissions decision"

Xavier: "When reading essays for Xavier, we are looking to learn something about the student we would not be able to find anywhere else on your application. I like to think of essays as interviews. This is a student's opportunity to share something unique about themselves, or something that is important to them."

U of Washington: "The holistic review assessment looks not only at academic preparation and performance, but also personal achievements and characteristics. The personal achievements and characteristics will never be the sole reason why a student is not admitted, but it could be a major factor in making a student successfully admitted."

3. Should I apply to colleges if my admission-test scores or grades are below their published ranges?

U of Minnesota: "In short, yes. With our holistic review, we do not have cut offs or formulas to guarantee admissions for students. Our average academic profile can help students determine their likelihood of admissions and we do admit 25% above the listed profile and 25% below. However, should students have concerns about their test scores and grades for specific colleges, this is when it is important to reach out to their admissions counselor, someone like myself, to talk about their interests and admissibility concerns"

Xavier: "Published ranges are just that- ranges. They are not minimums. The ranges that Xavier publishes are our middle 50%. This means that 25% of our applicants score below or above these ranges. I would still encourage students to apply who are below published ranges, specifically at schools that take a holistic approach to the application process."

U of Washington: "Absolutely! With the holistic review assessment, we do not have minimums for GPA and test scores."

4. What is holistic review?

U of Washington: "Choosing students from a very able group of applicants requires a selection process that looks beyond grades and

standardized test. While these factors are important, they tell only part of an applicant's story.

In addition to grade-point average (GPA) and test scores, the University takes into account many aspects of an applicant's achievements and personal history. Indicators of preparation and performance include: An overall strong level of academic achievement as demonstrated by GPA, rigor of curriculum, standardized test scores, and academic distinctions, taking full academic advantage of the senior year, and demonstrating a positive grade trend.

In addition to academic preparation and performance, personal achievements and characteristics can also indicate promise to benefit from and contribute to the University of Washington. These include: demonstrating a commitment to community service and leadership, exercising significant responsibility in a family, community, employment, or through activities, and demonstrating cultural awareness or unique perspectives or experiences.

The entire application, including the essays and extra curricular activities, is important in the individualized application review."

5. How do you differentiate between different high schools?

U of Minnesota: "We review students in the context of their high school. We do not compare students across separate high schools. As an example, we do not compare GPAs as some schools will have a weighted GPA scale, others are unweighted, there are 5.0 scales, 3.0 scales, etc. The high schools also help to provide their school's academic profile to provide context on how to review the students from the school."

Xavier: "As application readers, we differentiate high schools based on the profiles we receive from the school counselors. We look at the graduation rate, college matriculation, rigor of classes provided, among other things, to give us a better understanding of the high school."

6. I've moved around a lot during high school and have had some extenuating circumstances that have affected my grade performance. Is there a way for me to express this in my application?

MN: “There are open optional spaces at the end of the application for students to include additional information that can give context to circumstances that may have affected a student’s academic success. It is important to include this information, as when we review students, we are only able to utilize the information that they have sent to us.”

Xavier: “This is something you could address in the “additional information” area of the application. This is a great area to discuss something on your transcript or application that you would like to explain. You can also reach out to your admission counselor directly, via email or phone, and explain your situation.”

7. College applications are expensive and I’m not sure my parents can pay for them on top of tuition and all the expenses to come. Are there resources to help me pay for the application fees?

U of Minnesota: “If the application fee ever presents itself as a financial hardship for a student and family, we do provide an option for a fee waiver request. There are also questions prompted on the application where a student can qualify for a fee waiver”

Xavier: “Application fee waivers do exist. For students who qualify for an SAT or ACT fee waiver, you can also receive a waiver for applications. Speak with your school counselors in high school for more information.”

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