


EDUCATION

Breakdown of the Harvard Admissions Process

Trial documents reveal how the elite school chooses its students

By Jessica Wang, [Nicole Hong](#), and [Melissa Korn](#)

Oct. 23, 2018 5:30 am ET

 **Listen to this article** (4 minutes)

Harvard, like many selective universities, employs a holistic review of applicants that assesses their grades and test scores, extracurricular activities, athletic achievement and personal qualities.

As Harvard defends itself in federal court against allegations that it intentionally discriminates against Asian-American applicants, trial exhibits offer new details about who it admits, and why.

Summary Sheets

Harvard's admissions readers use a summary sheet to rate applicants and write comments about them. The sheet includes information about an applicant's race, gender, location and academic background. It tracks the numerical ratings given to the students by admissions officers.

Harvard's method includes boiling down objective and subjective assessments into numerical ratings, which help guide discussions among a 40-person admissions committee about who should be admitted. These ratings are filled out in the boxes on the summary sheet.

A sample summary sheet provided by Harvard:

GPA: /		% to 4 year: Prgm Tier: Exct Rank: % Rank:		Harvard Class of TAGS: AI:	
Birthplace:		Sex:		DOB:	
Hometown:		Search:		Fee W: P:	
Citizenship:		DISAD:		Fin Aid: Low Inc:	
CitType:		Fac/Staff:		HFAI:	
Eth:		EC 1:		Ath: Likely Letter:	
Conc:		EC 2:		Status:	
Career:		D: M: Fac:			
Ratings					
				Staff IV: Alum IV:	
MAX SAT		Total		MAX ACT	
MAX SATR		Essay		C S u b j	
AP					
Parent and Sib Information					
P1:		Marital Status:		Sep/Div:	
Ed:		P2:		Siblings:	
Ed:		Ed:			
Empl:		Empl			
EC Grid					
				Hrs /Wks	

Numerical Ratings

Applicants generally receive a score from one (best) through four, and some carry a plus or minus as well. Harvard provides admissions officers a rubric to help assign scores. For example, a 1 in the academic rating means someone has “summa cum laude potential,” with “near perfect scores and grades” and “unusual creativity.”

In the personal rating, which assesses an applicant’s personal qualities, a 1 is defined as “outstanding,” while a 4 indicates “bland or somewhat negative or immature.”


Harvard says the only rating that considers an applicant’s race is the overall rating, which captures the admission reader’s total impression of an applicant and isn’t just an average of the other ratings.

200 Variables

Harvard says there is no strict formula to its admissions process. An economist hired by Harvard ahead of trial to analyze its admissions data considered roughly 200 variables that play a role in admission decisions, including ethnicity, intended major, parental background and geography.

The school’s admit rates vary for each of those factors.

All of these factors are considered to assess candidates in a holistic manner, Harvard says, with the goal of creating a student body comprising people who are different enough from one another to provide a rich educational experience.

Variables in Professor Card’s Model			
			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Class Year• Gender• Race• Disadvantaged Flag• First Generation• Early Action• Athletic Rating of 1• Lineage• Double Lineage• Child of Harvard Faculty/Staff• Dean’s or Director’s Interest List• Fee Waiver• Applied for Financial Aid• Parent 1 Education Level• Parent 2 Education Level• Intended Concentration• Docket• SAT/ACT Math Score• SAT/ACT Verbal Score• Average SAT II Test Score• Lowest Converted GPA• Academic Index• Normalized Academic Index quadratic multiplied by indicator for positive normalized academic index• Normalized Academic Index quadratic multiplied by indicator for negative normalized academic index• Converted GPA• Missing SAT II Score	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic Rating• Extracurricular Rating• Athletic Rating• Personal Rating• Alumni Interview Personal Rating• Alumni Interview Overall Rating• Missing Alumni Interview• Rating of 2 or better for Academic and Extracurricular profile ratings• Rating of 2 or better for Academic and Athletic profile ratings• Rating of 2 or better for Athletic and Extracurricular profile ratings• Rating of 2 or better for Academic and Personal profile ratings• Rating of 2 or better for Personal and Extracurricular profile ratings• Rating of 2 or better for Personal and Athletic profile ratings• Teacher Recommendation 1 Rating• Teacher Recommendation 2 Rating• Guidance Counselor Rating• Number of Alumni Interview Ratings• School Support Ratings of 2 or Better• Parent 1’s Occupation• Parent 2’s Occupation• Father Deceased• Mother Deceased• Parent Attended Ivy League School• Metropolitan/Rural High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intended Career• School Type• Parent Attended Harvard Graduate School• Legal Permanent Resident Status• Total Hours Worked• Primary Extracurricular Activities• Staff Interview Rating Y/N• Born in United States• Lived Outside United States• Applicant’s Home State Has More ACT/SAT Takers• Average High School SAT I Math Score• Average High School SAT I Verbal Score• Average High School SAT I Writing Score• Percent of High School Speaks Only English• Percent of High School Applied to Out of State College• Average AP Tests Taken at High School• Percent of High School Students Require College Financial Aid• Average Honors Courses Taken at High School• Percent of High School with Parent High School Education Only• Average Scores Sent by Students at High School• Average Admission Rate for College Receiving Scores from High School• Percent Black Students at High School• Percent White Students at High School• Percent Hispanic Students at High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High School Median Family Income• Percent High School Below Poverty Line• High School Average Family Home Value• Average Neighborhood SAT Math Score• Average Neighborhood SAT Verbal Score• Average Neighborhood SAT Writing Score• Percent of Neighborhood Speaks Only English• Percent of Neighborhood Applied to Out of State College• Average AP Tests Taken in Neighborhood• Percent of Neighborhood Students Require College Financial Aid• Average Honors Courses Taken in Neighborhood• Percent of Neighborhood with Parent High School Education Only• Average Scores Sent by Students in Neighborhood• Average Admission Rate for College Receiving Scores from Neighborhood• Percent Black Students in Neighborhood• Percent White Students in Neighborhood• Percent Hispanic Students in Neighborhood• Neighborhood Median Family Income• Percent Neighborhood Below Poverty Line• Neighborhood Median Family Home Value• Missing Neighborhood Poverty Line• Missing Neighborhood Median Income• Missing Neighborhood Home Value

A page from an exhibit provided by Harvard University in the opening statement.

Location Matters

Harvard says on its website that domestic students hail from all 50 U.S. states.

When Harvard sends special recruitment letters to students with strong standardized test scores, the score cutoffs vary depending on, among other things, whether the student lives in “sparse country,” an internal Harvard reference to 20 states that send relatively few students to the school.

In a recent admissions year, white students in “sparse country” states received a recruitment letter if they scored 1310 or higher out of a possible 1600 on the combined verbal and math components of the PSAT. White females in other states had to score at least 1350 to receive a letter, while white males needed 1380.

‘Distinguishing Excellences’

Admissions officers look for what Harvard calls “distinguishing excellences.” For example, according to an interviewer handbook from the 2013-14 admissions cycle, the school seeks “unusual intelligence” or creative ability as evidenced by recordings of a musical or dance performance. They also look for recommendations, essays and interview reports that testify to an applicant’s “unusual effervescence, charity, maturity, or strength of character.”

High numerical scores in the ratings don’t guarantee admission to Harvard, and low numbers don’t automatically result in rejection. In determining whether an applicant will contribute to Harvard’s campus, admissions officers evaluate characteristics that are often difficult to quantify, like a student’s intellectual curiosity or ability to overcome personal struggle.

MORE

• [A Look at Harvard’s Admissions Guidelines](#) (Oct. 17)

• [The Secrets of Getting Into Harvard Were Once Closely Guarded. That’s About to Change.](#) (Oct. 11)

• [How Much Does Being a Legacy Help Your College Admissions Odds?](#) (July 9)

• [You Graduated Cum Laude? So Did Everyone Else](#) (July 2)

• [The Decision That Hurts Your Chances of Getting Into Harvard](#) (March 28)

Write to Nicole Hong at nicole.hong@wsj.com and Melissa Korn at melissa.korn@wsj.com