

What U.S. Universities Are Looking For

At Testtakers and USEIC, we interact with hundreds of students every year and invariably end up giving a fair bit of advice on which schools to apply to and how to make yourself more attractive to admissions officers. Here we will cover what schools are looking for.

There is no minimum SAT score for any school!

We are often asked, "What score do I need to get into school XXX?" Unlike the battery of tests present in the local Singapore system with cut-offs, American universities do not have "minimum" SAT scores. Rather, they use the SAT a standardized, universal yardstick to gauge your estimated academic potential relative to other applicants who are taking the same test. A strong SAT score gets your foot in the door, but to get accepted into an elite university you need to have a full package. It is hard to believe, but students with perfect SAT scores are regularly rejected by many schools every year.

Schools are looking for well-rounded, complete individuals, not just machine-like test takers who are experts in English grammar. Broadly speaking these are the things that top schools consider when evaluating your application:

■ **Academic Record**

Your grades have to be good, plain and simple. Schools look at your complete academic record so O level results are considered, as are your grades in 10th and 11th grade. It is important to challenge yourself and you should always take the hardest courses that are available to you. Sometimes this may mean that you won't be able to take a course that really interests you in favor of a more rigorous course. Don't worry; you can study that in university with one of your electives.

■ **Test Scores**

SAT: Reasoning Test (old SAT I) scores are important, as are your scores on the SAT: Subject Tests (old SAT IIs) if they are required. Students at non-international schools should also take the TOEFL test just to get that out of the way as well.

■ **CCA/Extra Curricular Activities**

These are very important indeed. Rather than being a member of 10 different clubs or activities, it is much better to have a leadership position in one or two. Sporting excellence is also a very good thing and even if you aren't going to the ASEAN Games to compete, just participating in any team-oriented activities will help your chances. Americans love sports and many of us (the author included) learned more about dealing with others, teamwork, and mutual respect on the sporting field than in the classroom.

■ **Application and Interview**

Your application essay is hugely important, as it will provide admissions officers with a window into what makes you tick. The key things is to present why you are right for the school, not why the school is right for you. This is particularly important if you are lucky enough to get an interview with an alumnus of the universities. The author has interviewed many students from leading Junior Colleges and is consistently shocked by the stark lack of humility and sense of entitlement on display. Just because you attend a "top" JC in Singapore doesn't count for much of anything in the grander scheme of things and doesn't mean you will automatically get in anywhere....

■ **Teacher Recommendations**

Find a couple of teachers who know you well, who like you, and hopefully are good writers. These teacher recommendations are looked at carefully and should show insight into your personality and potential.

■ **Other factors**

Did your father/mother/brother also attend the school? Will your rich parents build the school a new dormitory? Is the admissions officer in a good mood when he or she reads your application? Remember, the process is very arbitrary and luck does come into play. If you don't get into your dream school (most people don't!) then life still goes on and there is another school that will be more than happy to have you.

If you are interested in finding out more about the SAT standardized tests and the American university application system, or are interested in conducting a custom-made SAT preparation program at your school, please contact Testtakers Singapore by calling +65.6728.7476, or via email at