

College Admissions Race Game

Overview

The ECMC College Place (TCP) College Admissions Race is an engaging and fun game that walks students through a mock college admissions committee review process. Students will learn that the holistic admissions process considers criteria beyond grade point average (GPA) and college entrance exam scores, including rigor of academic program, personal qualities, extracurricular involvement and quality of application materials. The game takes about 45 minutes to play. For a shorter version, you can omit scenarios 26-29.

Setup

Print the Scenarios and GPA Cards (front/back; cards can be found following the game instructions).

Intro

Read to audience: In the college admissions process, you are more than just a number. There's more to you than just your GPA or a score on the SAT or ACT. College admissions committees want to get to know the authentic you through your application materials. This philosophy is sometimes referred to as "holistic admissions," meaning that the admissions committee wants to learn about your whole person, including your academic, extracurricular, and personal qualities. It's up to you to tell your full and complete story in your application.

Today we'll play a game that illustrates the many criteria that factor into college admissions decisions. In our game, some of you will represent nine students who have applied to Awesome University, a highly selective institution. I will serve as the Dean of Admissions and everyone else will act as admissions officers on the admissions committee. Throughout the game, we'll learn more about each of the applicants and will offer admissions to the top three candidates.

[Ask for nine volunteers to come to the front of the room. Hand each volunteer a GPA Card and then ask them to line up in descending GPA order facing the audience, with the 4.0 on the audience's left. Instruct volunteers to hold their GPA Card in front of them, with GPA facing the audience.]

So here we have our nine stellar applicants to Awesome University. We wish we could offer admissions to all of them, but we only have room for three candidates. If we were only to admit based on GPA without knowing anything else about the applicants, which three applicants would we go with?

[Allow audience to respond. Affirm their responses that if only considering GPA the committee would admit the students with GPAs of 4.0, 3.9, and 3.8]

Let's learn a bit more about these applicants beyond their GPA. Applicants, on the back of your GPA Card you have a list of your personal qualities or details related to your application. As we move through the game, I will read through scenarios based on these qualities or details. The scenarios will have an impact on your admissions decision and I will prompt you to move up (to your right) the line if there's a positive impact or down the line (to your left) if there's a negative impact. In some cases, one scenario may impact more than one applicant. If a scenario has a negative impact on more than one applicant, the lowest student should move first, and vice versa. After I read each scenario, the admissions committee and I will discuss the impact of the scenario.

[Start game by reading Scenario 1. After the students move up the line, discuss Scenario 1 based on the suggested discussion topics. Then repeat process with the remaining Scenarios.]

Scenarios

- 1. If you have taken an exceptionally strong academic program (3.8, 3.4) +2**
Discussion: It's important to take full advantage of the academic challenges available to you at your school. Ask your school counselor about your school's rigorous classes, which could include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Dual/Concurrent-Enrollment, Honors, etc. In high school, you should challenge yourself in all four core subject areas (English, Math, Science, Social Studies) and for many colleges, foreign language as well. Work closely with your school counselor to build a challenging schedule that will best prepare you for college. Research shows that the strongest predictor of your academic performance in college is whether you performed well in college-level courses while in high school.
- 2. If you are the captain of your school's step dance team (3.7) +1**
Discussion: Colleges want you to fully participate in their campus communities, and the best indicator of your potential contributions to your college community is your extracurricular involvement while in high school. In high school, deeply involve yourself in the things that you are passionate about. In this example, not only does this student participate on the step team, but has also shown leadership by becoming the team captain.
- 3. If you clearly stated that this college was your first choice by submitting an early decision application and commitment (3.6) +2**
Discussion: Some colleges consider an applicant's "demonstrated interest" when making admissions decisions. Colleges want as many of their admitted students to accept their offer of admissions as possible, and demonstrated interest can demonstrate how likely a student is to do so. Applicants can demonstrate their interest in many ways, including filling out an online inquiry form, emailing their admissions representative, visiting campus, attending the college's recruitment events, or by applying early decision. Early decision is binding, meaning that a student commits to attend that institution if admitted, regardless of how much financial aid the college may offer. Keep in mind that it can take a lot of time, energy, and money to demonstrate interest, so be sure to ask

each college you're interested in whether they consider demonstrated interest. Many do not, so submitting a quality application is all you need to do to demonstrate your interest!

4. If your intended major is pre-law or pre-med (3.8, 3.9) -1
Discussion: Some colleges can only admit a certain number of students per major, so sometimes it is more competitive to gain admissions to a college if you're interested in the most popular majors. Pre-law and the pre-med pathway are two of the most popular areas of study.

5. If your intended major is Greek (3.5) +2
Discussion: In contrast to our last scenario, some colleges have to ensure they admit enough students into a major in order to keep that department running! Some majors, like Greek, may not be as popular so you may get a boost in the admissions process. Careful though—don't try to game the system! It's important that you not commit yourself to an area of study in which you do not have a true interest.

6. If you did not regularly meet with your school counselor or college advisor to get feedback on your college list and applications (3.7) -1
Discussion: Don't be afraid to ask for help! Your school counselors and college advisor can help you build a college list that helps ensure you gain admissions to a college that will serve you well. You'll want to apply to at least three colleges, including a reach, a target, and a likely. A reach is a college where the admissions criteria are a bit of a stretch for you based on your academic qualifications, but still possible. A target is a college where the admissions criteria are on target for you. A likely is a college where your academic qualifications exceed the criteria and you are likely to be admitted. Once you've established a list of at least one reach, target, and likely, your school counselor or college advisor can help you develop a strong essay that fully conveys your story, brainstorm whom to ask for recommendations, and make sure every "t" is crossed and "i" dotted on all application materials.

7. If you asked for a letter of recommendation from a prominent public official who didn't know much about you rather than a teacher or coach who knows you well (3.5) -1
Discussion: when it comes to letters of recommendation, the fanciness of the letterhead or the prominence of the individual signing the letter matters less than the content of the letter. Good letters of recommendation include the recommender's specific reasons and examples that demonstrate you would be a good addition to the college campus. Oftentimes if you ask a public official or famous person for a letter of recommendation and they do not know you well, they will write a generic form letter that does not add to the quality of your application.

8. If you forgot to change the name of the college to which you were applying when you cut and pasted your college essay (3.8) -4
Discussion: Whoops! Mistakes like this are easy to make but can be quite detrimental. Before you hit the submit button, double check every detail. Better yet, ask a trusted friend, parent, school counselor, or college advisor to do a final edit for you.

9. If you are a legacy (3.5, 3.2) +2
Discussion: Legacy means that one or more of your family members also attended the college to which you're applying. Some schools count any relative while others count only parents, so be sure to ask an admissions officer what counts as legacy status. Some schools give preferential treatment to legacy students because a legacy student is more likely to attend if admitted.

10. If you did not write the optional essay for your college application (3.7, 4.0) -1
Discussion: A good rule of thumb is that if you have the option to add more details or information to your application that you haven't included elsewhere, go for it! Otherwise it's a missed opportunity.

11. If the topic of your college essay was "What I learned from playing sports" (3.9, 3.6) -1
Discussion: You want your essay to be authentic and unique to you. You should also provide specific examples to make your point. Try to show your message rather than just tell it. For example, while many students can write a similarly generic essay by telling the reader that playing sports taught them perseverance and teamwork, only you can provide vivid and specific anecdotes that show how you demonstrated these qualities on and off the field.

12. If you wrote the essay of the year - the one that was passed around the admissions office because it was so good (3.3) +3
Discussion: See, hard work on your essay pays off!

13. If you plagiarized your history paper and got caught, sit down - you're out of the competition entirely (3.8)
Discussion: Many college applications require you to list any major discipline infractions on your application. For colleges with honor codes or honor systems, their admissions committee pays close to attention to any infractions related to plagiarism, dishonesty, or stealing. Depending on the severity of your infraction, your application could be rejected. Colleges value integrity and good character, so make positive choices in high school that demonstrate those qualities.

14. If you will be the first in your family to attend college (3.4) +2
Discussion: Colleges welcome and value all types of diversity, including diversity of experiences. Just because no other member of your family has gone to college doesn't mean that you can't attend some of the best colleges in the country. Congratulations on being a trailblazer in your family!

15. **If during the summer before your senior year you provided childcare for your younger siblings, worked a part-time job, or attended an enriching summer program (3.9, 3.5)** +2
Discussion: Sometimes we overlook some of our most important activities and experiences when we brainstorm our resume for college applications. Colleges consider anything you do besides attending class and doing your homework as an extracurricular activity. The contributions you make to your siblings and family by providing childcare, the real world lessons learned during your part-time job, and the new horizons reached during enriching summer academic programs teach you more about yourself, how you interact with others, and how you experience the world around you.
16. **If you participated in zero extracurricular activities during high school (4.0)** -3
Discussion: If you don't involve yourself in your school and local community, you are really missing out on valuable experience and lessons that would help you succeed in college. Get involved—it's not too late to explore an existing passion or discover a new one!
17. **If you regularly volunteered for several organizations in your community (3.6)** +1
Discussion: By regularly giving your time and energy to support others in your community, you demonstrate a concern for others as well as dedication. In addition, you may encounter new neighbors and experiences that help you to grow by pushing you outside of your comfort zone. Many colleges have strong cultures of community service and/or service-learning experiences that tie your academics to community service. Your previous community service experience shows you would be a good fit for their campus cultures.
18. **If you want to study computer science, but your high school doesn't offer any computer science courses, so you took a free online coding class instead (3.9)** +1
Discussion: Intellectual curiosity is a quality that colleges admire greatly. Not only did you take advantage of all the rigorous academic opportunities available to you in your high school, but you pushed yourself further and more deeply explored a subject about which you are passionate. Impressive!
19. **If you prepared for the SAT or ACT by first taking the PSAT or PreACT (3.2)** +2
Discussion: Even in a holistic admissions process, most colleges will consider your standardized test scores. By taking a practice test like the PSAT or PreACT, you have experience under your belt for the first time you take the SAT or ACT. Additionally, you can use your results from the PSAT or PreACT to focus your preparation for the SAT or ACT on the areas where you could improve the most. Did you know that both the SAT and ACT offer free, online, customized practice resources based on your practice test scores? Don't miss out. You should also know that your PSAT and PreACT results can provide you with useful information to explore academic majors and careers of interest and/or quality you for college scholarships.

20. If you are a varsity athlete (3.3, 3.2) +2
Discussion: Athletics are another excellent example of extracurricular involvement. By making the varsity team, you demonstrate a long-term commitment and the dedication to master a skill. This also applies to performing in plays and musicals, competing with your debate team, or working on your school newspaper or yearbook.
21. If you are a varsity athlete and took second place at states in your sport (3.3) +1
Discussion: This accomplishment shows that you worked hard enough to be among the best of the best in your sport. If your college is recruiting for a sports team, you may also get a boost based on the recruiting staff's interest.
22. If you got a D in a core academic course at the end of your junior year (3.3) -3
Discussion: Remember, your performance in a rigorous program of study is the best indicator of your future success in a college academic environment. As your high school classes increase in difficulty, be sure to ask questions during class, do all of your homework, and ask for extra tutoring opportunities to ensure your grades stay strong through your junior and senior year.
23. If you included an additional statement in your application explaining that you earned the D because you missed many days of school due to a long-term illness (3.3) +1
Discussion: This is a great example of a student becoming a self-advocate in the college application process. Recall that it is up to you to tell your whole story, which includes providing context for the less than ideal parts of your story. You're not making excuses, but rather you're helping the admissions committee understand what you have experienced. Though this background information won't completely redeem the D on your transcript, it does lessen the impact on your chances for admissions.
24. If you attended the college information session at your high school and introduced yourself to the admissions officer (3.6) +1
Discussion: Not only is this another example of demonstrating your interest if the school considers it, but oftentimes admissions officers will share useful tips regarding their admissions process. Furthermore, you may have the opportunity to better understand how the school is/isn't a good fit for you. By making a personal connection with the admissions officer, you can also follow up in the future with any questions that might come up.
25. If you decided to protect your GPA by not taking any of the rigorous courses available at your school (4.0) -2
Discussion: Nice try, but you missed out on so many opportunities to prepare yourself for college-level coursework. Admissions officers will read through every line of your transcript with a focus on which of your school's rigorous courses you took. If you've taken the path of least resistance through high school, you have hurt your chances for admissions.

Read to audience: That was our final scenario and the end of our admissions committee deliberation. What you see before you is the committee's ranking of applicants. Our top three applicants will be admitted—congratulations! The rest of the applicants will be added to the waitlist. Hopefully, our applicants on the waitlist have applied to at least two other colleges, their target and likely schools, so they have other great options to get excited about at this point in case they are not pulled off the waitlist.

But this isn't the end of the game, neither today nor in real life!

[Ask all applicants to remain standing in line.]

Once you are admitted, there are several key actions to take in order to successfully enroll as a student in the fall. From reviewing financial aid award letters to submitting your tuition deposit to attending orientation, there's a lot to do once you celebrate your happy admissions news! Let's see how those next steps play out for our applicants through a few more scenarios.

- 26. If your financial aid award letter wasn't enough and your family can't afford for you to attend, sit down (3.4)**

Discussion: Sometimes the college won't be able to provide enough financial aid in order for you and your family to afford the total cost of attendance. Rather than taking out an irresponsible amount of loans, you and your family made the decision to start off at your community college and then transfer to a four-year college to save money.

- 27. But wait, if your financial aid award letter wasn't enough and your family can't afford for you to attend, there's good news! If you spent two hours a week throughout your senior year applying to local, regional, and national scholarships, move back to your place in line - you were awarded enough external scholarships to cover the full cost of attendance! (3.4)**

Discussion: Congrats! Think of applying for scholarships as a part-time job that potentially pays much better than minimum wage. By checking in regularly with your school counselor for local scholarship opportunities, conducting your own online scholarship search, and asking your parents if their employers have scholarship programs, you did your due diligence to make attending your dream school an affordable reality!

- 28. If you caught senioritis and earned three Fs on your final transcript, your admissions has been rescinded. Please sit down (3.6)**

Discuss: This seems harsh, but it is a reality! You will be required to submit your final high school transcript to the college you plan to attend, and they will review it in detail. If your grades have dropped dramatically while a waitlisted applicant has continued to perform with excellence, the college might opt to go with the student on the waitlist instead of you.

29. If you stopped checking your email account and didn't complete important enrollment steps like applying for on-campus housing, attending summer orientation, submitting health forms, or registering for classes, please sit down—you failed to fully enroll as a student! (3.5)

Discuss: It is your responsibility to keep track of the many steps required to successfully enroll as a student. If you do not check your college email and meet the required deadlines, the college may assume that you're not interested and that you have decided to attend another college. Your lack of follow-through means another student on the waitlist can attend instead of you.

Read to audience: We now have a new top three. Congratulations to our waitlisted candidates who are now admitted!

Ask the two previously waitlisted candidates: Now that you're admitted, what steps are you going to be sure to take to make sure you get to enroll in the fall?

Wrap-Up Discussion

So as mock applicants and mock admissions officers, today we've seen first-hand that colleges are not looking for one particular type of student. They're looking for the personalities and stories behind your GPAs and test scores. We now understand that admissions decisions take into consideration a wide variety of factors, from extracurricular involvement, rigor of academic coursework, and quality of application materials.

[Group discussion: What surprised you about the outcome of this game? After participating in this game, how will you approach your college search and application process differently?]

4.0

- You did not write the optional essay for your college application.
- You have participated in zero extracurricular activities.
- You decided to protect your GPA by not taking any of the rigorous courses available at your school.

4.0

3.9

- Your intended major is pre-med.
- You wrote your essay on “What I learned from playing sports.”
- During the summer before your senior year, you provided care for your younger siblings.
- You want to study computer science, but your high school doesn’t offer any computer science courses, so you took a free online coding class instead.

3.9

3.8

- You have taken an exceptionally strong academic program.
- Your intended major is pre-law.
- You forgot to change the name of the college to which you were applying when you cut and pasted your college essay.
- You plagiarized your history paper and got caught.

3.8

3.7

- You are captain of your school's step dance team.
- You did not regularly meet with your school counselor or college advisor to get feedback on your college list and applications.
- You did not write the optional essay for your college application.

3.7

3.6

- You clearly stated that this college was your first choice by submitting an early decision application and commitment.
- The topic of your college essay was "What I learned from playing sports."
- You have regularly volunteered for several organizations in your community.
- You attended the college information session at your high school and introduced yourself to the admissions officer.
- You caught senioritis and earned three Fs on your final transcript.

3.6

3.5

- You plan to major in Greek.
- You asked for a letter of recommendation from a prominent public official who didn't know much about you rather than a teacher or coach who knows you well.
- You are a legacy.
- During the summer before your senior year, you participated in an enriching summer program.
- You stopped checking your email account and didn't complete important enrollment steps like applying for on-campus housing, attending summer orientation, submitting health forms or registering for classes.

3.5

3.4

- You have taken an exceptionally strong academic program.
- You will be the first in your family to attend college.
- Your financial aid award letter wasn't enough and your family can't afford for you to attend.
- You spent two hours a week throughout your senior year applying to local, regional, and national scholarships.

3.4

3.3

- You wrote the essay of the year - the one that was passed around the admissions office because it was so good.
- You are a varsity athlete and took second place at the state championship in your sport.
- You got a D in a core academic course at the end of your junior year.
- You included an additional statement in your application explaining that you earned the D because you missed many days of school due to a long-term illness.

3.3

3.2

- You are a legacy.
- If you prepared for the SAT or ACT by first taking the PSAT or PreACT.
- You are a varsity athlete.

3.2