

*To Students:*

## **What Colleges Look For**

*How Colleges Choose YOU*

*By J.S. Sheppard*

One September a few years ago, I had a meeting with a parent, the father of a senior who had come in to finish putting together a final list of colleges for his son. Mr. Mason, as I'll call him, was a very nice man who was also a brilliant engineer. He brought with him a fairly thick folder that he presented to me as the end product of a summer's thought and research. On top of the pile was a lengthy spreadsheet, filled with names of colleges followed by calculations that I, an utter non-mathematician, didn't understand. "Here," he said with some pride. "I've devised a formula that will predict precisely Jimmy's chances of admission to all these colleges."

I looked at his spreadsheet carefully for some time, trying to comprehend what he had done. I couldn't. Finally I looked up and said, because I had to say something, "Mr. Mason, college admission isn't a science. It's an art." My statement was met with a funny little smile and a blank stare. It was left brain versus right brain. I was speaking Greek; he was speaking Croatian. Silence. When we finally recovered from the moment enough to resume our conversation (after a good laugh, I might add), it turned out that Mr. Mason and Jimmy had, in fact, done a fine job of choosing colleges, and the young man was admitted to several of his top-choice institutions. However, good engineer that he was, Mr. Mason had assumed that the whole process could be quantified and explained logically. It can't.

Illogical as their admission procedures may seem at times, most colleges have similar expectations of their applicants in terms of their high school preparation. This section outlines briefly for you what colleges want to see on the transcript of a qualified candidate. In the article "In Your Admission Folder," you will find a description of all the required elements of an application folder and, at the end, a "reality check" about admission to highly selective institutions.

### *College admission criteria and your application folder*

Before you send an application to a college you must, as best you can, determine if you meet its admission criteria. Take a good look at yourself, your academic potential, and your accomplishments. The mere fact that you attend Lawrence Academy - or any other high school, for that matter - does not mean that your college of choice will accept you. Being at Lawrence Academy affords you the opportunity to get an excellent education. What you do with that opportunity is up to you. The more selective a college is, the higher its standards are for its applicants. The best gauge of how you will do in college is your performance in high school. If you have pushed yourself, colleges will note that. If you have SAT scores in the 99th percentile, but C+/B- grades, they will note that as well.

First, colleges will judge you on the courses you have taken and the grades you have received. Simply meeting Lawrence Academy's graduation requirements will not be sufficient to make you competitive in the admission process at many institutions. Most selective colleges expect applicants to have taken the following courses:

4 years of English

4 years of mathematics  
3-4 years of natural science  
3-4 years of foreign language  
3-4 years of history and social sciences  
Electives in the arts (at some institutions)

Colleges like to see honors and AP courses in a student's program (if the high school offers them), but *only for students who are truly qualified for those classes*. Admission officers would rather see a B in an AP or honors course than an A in a regular course (but bear in mind many applicants take AP courses and earn an A). Do not get in over your head; accept your limitations as well as your strengths. Nothing is gained by taking an AP or an honors course and earning a C or a D.

Second, make sure that you have taken the specific courses and tests required by the institution to which you are applying. For example, to apply to engineering schools, you should take four years of math through calculus, physics (honors if recommended), and, for many schools, the Physics SAT Subject Test.

Third, a stellar academic record alone will not ensure your admission to the most selective colleges. What else can you bring to the college: athletic, musical, or artistic talent, uncommon intellectual pursuits, participation in community life?

Fourth, although test results are only one factor in the selection process, they are important. Do your scores fall within the range presented by most admitted students to an institution? If they are below that range, are you being realistic?

Once you have addressed these issues to the best of your ability, you can either add the college in question to your list or eliminate it. Remember, you need "reaches" as well as likely choices, so if you really like a school that seems too competitive for you, leave it on the list for the time being!