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New Survey Shows Essays, Letters of Recommendation Gain Importance With College Admissions

Fairfax, VA -- Standardized test scores have reemerged as the baseline that larger colleges and universities use to eliminate applicants whose scores are too low. With the recent flood of applications, colleges have had to rely on test scores to weed out less qualified applicants. "Great SAT scores won't get you in, but lousy ones will keep you out," says Mark Sklarow, IECA executive director. "They've created a floor." The smaller the college, the less important SAT scores are. Conversely, essays remain important at smaller colleges, but less important than at larger universities. These conclusions are based on a new survey of college admission consultants, conducted by the Independent Educational Consultants Association.

"With selective schools, the first cut-off is standardized testing," says IECA member Peggy Baker (PA). "When you reach the particular bar for testing, then everything else is weighed." Number one on the list, for the third straight year, is a rigorous high school curriculum that challenges students and may include AP or IB classes.

Moving up the Top 10 List over the last three years (from #8 to #5) are letters of recommendation. Colleges do want to know what teachers are saying about the applicant. This year's survey indicated teacher recommendations to be more important than those from clergy, counselors, or employers. Supplemental recommendations have dropped off the list as many colleges are suspect of the authenticity of these. And new to the list is a demonstration of intellectual curiosity. Colleges want students who exhibit a love of learning.

While grades, great test scores and a demanding curriculum remain high on the list, demonstrating your passion for something and the ability to articulate it, possibly in your essay is important," Says IECA Associate Member Judy Zodda (MA).

The complete Top 10 List can be found at www.IECAonline.com, and is attached to this press release. The IECA was founded in 1976 as a nonprofit, professional association of established educational consultants. IECA Member Educational Consultants are professionals who assist students and families with educational decision-making. Their educational backgrounds, specialized training, campus visitations, and professional experience equip them to help students choose schools, colleges, or programs that meet their individual needs and goals. Membership in the Association requires an appropriate Master's degree or comparable training and a minimum of three years of experience in the profession, as well as meeting IECA's professional standards and subscribing to its Principles of Good Practice. Members continually update their knowledge and maintain skills through IECA-sponsored meetings, workshops, training programs, and information exchanges with colleges, schools, programs and other consultants.

Top Ten Strengths and Experiences Colleges Look for in High School Students

(Based on a 2006-2007 survey of IECA member consultants)

1. A rigorous high school curriculum that challenges the student and may include AP or IB classes.
2. Grades that represent strong effort and an upward trend. However, slightly lower grades in a rigorous program are preferred to all as in less challenging coursework.
3. Solid scores on standardized tests (SAT, ACT). These should be consistent with high school performance.
4. Passionate involvement in a few activities, demonstrating leadership and initiative. Depth, not breadth, of experience is most important.
5. Letters of recommendation from teachers and guidance counselor that give evidence of integrity, special skills, positive character traits, and an interest in learning.
6. Special talents or experiences that will contribute to an interesting and well-rounded student body.
7. A well-written essay that provides insight into the student's unique personality, values and goals. The application essay should be thoughtful and highly personal. It should demonstrate careful and well-constructed writing.
8. Demonstrated enthusiasm, often exhibited by campus visits and an interview, showing an interest toward attending the college.
9. Out of school experiences, including work and community service that illustrate responsibility, dedication, and development of areas of interest.
10. Demonstrated intellectual curiosity through reading, school and leisure pursuits, and more.