

Common Application: The Hidden Factors

In an April blog post titled [Recommendation Letters In the Era of Covid-19](#), we noted that “LORs [letters of recommendation] were important in admission decisions even before the Coronavirus made in-person interviews problematic, and they’re likely to increase in importance now.” Nothing that we’ve learned since then has changed our minds about that...

...but there’s another dimension to recommenders and recommendations about which you might not be aware: whoever completes your Common App School Report (often conflated with the “counselor recommendation”) is going to be asked to rate you in terms of the following factors and in this manner:

Compared to other students in his or her class, how do you rate this applicant in terms of academic achievements?
<input type="radio"/> No basis
<input type="radio"/> Below Average
<input type="radio"/> Average
<input type="radio"/> Good (above average)
<input type="radio"/> Very good (well above average)
<input type="radio"/> Excellent (top 10%)
<input type="radio"/> Outstanding (top 5%)
<input type="radio"/> One of the top few encountered in my career
Compared to other students in his or her class, how do you rate this applicant in terms of extracurricular accomplishments?
<input type="radio"/> No basis
<input type="radio"/> Below Average
<input type="radio"/> Average
<input type="radio"/> Good (above average)
<input type="radio"/> Very good (well above average)
<input type="radio"/> Excellent (top 10%)
<input type="radio"/> Outstanding (top 5%)
<input type="radio"/> One of the top few encountered in my career
Compared to other students in his or her class, how do you rate this applicant in terms of personal qualities and character?
<input type="radio"/> No basis
<input type="radio"/> Below Average
<input type="radio"/> Average
<input type="radio"/> Good (above average)
<input type="radio"/> Very good (well above average)
<input type="radio"/> Excellent (top 10%)
<input type="radio"/> Outstanding (top 5%)
<input type="radio"/> One of the top few encountered in my career
Compared to other students in his or her class, how do you rate this applicant overall?
<input type="radio"/> No basis
<input type="radio"/> Below Average
<input type="radio"/> Average
<input type="radio"/> Good (above average)
<input type="radio"/> Very good (well above average)
<input type="radio"/> Excellent (top 10%)
<input type="radio"/> Outstanding (top 5%)
<input type="radio"/> One of the top few encountered in my career

Each of these four questions requires your counselor to rate you in rather stark terms, and, naturally, the more competitive the school to which you're applying, the higher the rating you want in each case. So how do you get "stay high"?

It's no surprise that academics is first on the list: Your academic performance, as reflected by the grades you received and the difficulty of the coursework you took, is the number one criterion admissions counselors consider when judging applicants. Among the academic achievements that your counselor/recommender might consider are your course sections, weighted GPA, class rank, and any academic honors you've received, among others. The first three are cumulative, and most impacted by challenging courses – AP, IB, AICE, and some Dual Enrollment – and academic honors typically require sustained, superior performance. So, starting early on academic challenge in your high school career is mandatory if you're aiming for a top academic rating.

The next factor, extracurricular accomplishments, is asking your counselor/recommender about the impact of your extracurricular commitment compared to that of your classmates. This buttresses an idea that we've stressed to the students we work with: What really matters is not the number of activities you do, but the long-term depth of commitment, leadership, initiative, collaborative nature, and positive impact of what you do – the difference you make. Sure, we can give you examples of impactful activities, such as debate, visual or performing arts, varsity athletics, student government, school newspaper –but nothing compares to conceiving and initiating your very own project (we're in the forefront of helping students identify and create unique projects that underscore all the qualities we listed above!)

The above ties in with the third factor on the list, how the counselor/recommender rates you in terms of personal qualities and character compared to other students. While a poll of counselors to find out what they consider to be good personal qualities and character is beyond the scope of this blog, it's a good bet that the results would be the same if we were to poll college administrators. Luckily, we don't need to do that: in a September 2017 blog titled [What Matters to Admission Officers?](#), we reported on the Harvard University Graduate School of Education's Making Caring Common (MCC) Project having issued a call to action in an e-document titled, "[Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern For Others And The Common Good Through College Admissions.](#)" With over 200 endorsers and supporters, 175 of whom were college administrators, the MCC's report focused on admitting students who demonstrate and promote more meaningful contributions to others, community service and engagement for the public good. It encourages admission officers to assess students' ethical engagement and contributions to others.

In a recent MCC press release titled [New Collective Statement from 315 College Admission Deans Prioritizes Self-Care and Care for Others During the Pandemic](#), one of the caring themes the release discussed concerned the type of student colleges are looking for. It's very important to note that a familiar, pre-pandemic theme appears:

Service and Contributions to Others. The deans express that they value contributions to others and service during this time for those who are in a position to provide these contributions. They emphasize that they are not looking for extraordinary forms of service or leadership during the pandemic. They don't want to create a "pandemic service Olympics." They are looking for contributions that are authentic and meaningful, including contributions that respond to the many needs created by the pandemic.

And that brings us to the last of the four factors, how your counselor/recommender rates you overall compared to other students in your class. While there might be other criteria on which your counselor/recommender might make this rating judgment, we're confident that if you do well on the first three rating factors, you're likely to do well on this last one.