



NONACADEMIC FACTORS

## Insight into Nonacademic Factors and Practice

Building on a history of partnering with higher education thought leaders, the College Board has launched the Future Admissions Tools and Models Initiative to study and improve the practice of admission, with a special focus on holistic and individualized review, in order to expand student access and success. Developed and structured as a partnership with member institutions, the initiative brings together practitioners from a wide range of colleges and universities, along with expert researchers, to identify, extend, and scale innovative and promising practices through the development of research-based frameworks and tools.

### Executive Summary

This paper provides an initial summary description of a comprehensive study examining the history and current use of nonacademic factors in admission. The full study includes historical context, a review of the research literature, an analysis of relevant theoretical frameworks, and a set of in-depth case studies that explore how nonacademic factors are used in practice.

#### Key Findings

- High school and student contextual factors play a more important role than other nonacademic factors in the review processes at our case study sites.
- The importance of nonacademic factors in college admission, which are associated with institutional type and selectivity, varies widely.
- Nonacademic factors play a more important role among highly selective private colleges and universities.
- Beyond academic and contextual factors, the additional types of nonacademic factors that are most frequently used are performance factors and attitudinal constructs.

# Study Context and Approach

Since the advent of modern college admission, many colleges have considered nonacademic factors for a range of reasons and purposes as varied and unique as their institutions. Over the last 20 years, many colleges have evolved and expanded their consideration of these factors. In conversations with admission leaders from a range of institutions, they have asked for help in continuing to improve and refine their use of nonacademic attributes, with a focus on research, data, and outcomes.

Our study on nonacademic factors focuses on three key questions:

- What research has been done on the use of these factors in admission and what does it say (or not say)?
- What theoretical frameworks exist and might be helpful to practitioners in evaluating and further developing their use of these factors?
- What can we learn from in-depth case studies at institutions about how nonacademic factors are used in practice?

## Research Review

Despite the growing interest in nonacademic factors, our review of the research literature shows that there is little empirical research on how colleges and universities use these criteria in their admission decision-making process. The majority of available research consists of one-time studies, with most of them examining the efficacy of nonacademic criteria in predicting student persistence and/or GPA.

In addition, the terminology and conceptual frameworks that describe these factors are not consistent or clear. For example, despite common usage, the term “noncognitive” is not representative of the set of nonacademic factors that admission offices are collecting and evaluating and the outcomes they are seeking to influence.

1. Kyllonen, Patrick C. (2005). *The Case for Noncognitive Assessments* (R&D Connections, September 2005). Princeton, NJ: ETS Research & Development. Other frameworks are examined in Schmitt, Oswald, and Gillespie's "12 Dimensions of Student Performance," and Kyllonen's "21st Century Skills."

## Definitions and Classification

After reviewing a range of existing classificatory frameworks, we selected the following framework, based on its broad categories and its potential for practical application and use. The methodology we selected was developed by Patrick Kyllonen.<sup>1</sup> This framework includes five categories of nonacademic factors:

- 1. Basic personality factors** (Extroversion, Emotional stability, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness/intellect, Circadian type);
- 2. Affective competencies** (Creativity, Emotional intelligence, Cognitive style, Metacognition/confidence);
- 3. Performance factors** (Domain proficiency, General proficiency, Effort/motivation/engagement, Discipline/professionalism, Teamwork, Leadership, and Management/organization skills);
- 4. Attitudinal constructs** (Self-concept, Self-efficacy, Attribution tendencies, Interests, Social attitudes/values/beliefs, Ethics/morality, Intercultural sensitivity, Adaptability/flexibility); and
- 5. Learning skills** (Study habits, Organization, Time management, Test anxiety, Stress/coping).

We used this framework to empirically analyze how the case study institutions are using nonacademic factors.

## About the Case Studies

We selected 10 case study institutions representing a diverse pool along several axes including control (public/private) size, selectivity, and geography. We conducted phone interviews with the senior enrollment officer on each campus and another individual, usually in the office of admission, who was recommended by the senior enrollment officer.

Interviewees were asked to identify the admission criteria used at his/her institution. These admission factors were categorized as:

- **Academic** — high school GPA, test scores, academic awards, etc.
- **School context** — number of AP<sup>®</sup> courses offered at the school, percentage of students going to four-year institutions, percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, etc.
- **Student context** — first-generation college aspirant, family income, etc.

For the nonacademic factors above, we employed the categorization noted earlier. A full description of the 10 institutions and their classifications can be found in the Appendix.

## Major Findings

Across all 10 case studies, we observed four consistent patterns in the use of nonacademic factors.

### Near-Universal Use of Nonacademic Factors

**Across all of the case study institutions, nonacademic factors are used to admit at least some of the first-year entering students.** While articles on college admission in media often suggest that admission decisions are based solely on test scores and grades, nearly all institutions in these case studies consider nonacademic factors.

#### CAMPUS IMPLICATIONS:

- ✔ Consider reviewing your materials, talking points, and other student-facing messages to ensure that they clearly describe how nonacademic factors are used in application review and decision making.

### Primary Role of Academic Factors

**Academic factors remain the most important determinants of admission.** Academic factors used by institutions include high school grades, the rigor of the course work that students have taken (e.g., the number of AP courses taken and the number of high-level math and sciences courses in which applicants were enrolled), and standardized admission test scores.

#### CAMPUS IMPLICATIONS:

- ✔ There is still a critical need to match the student to the institution on the basis of academic fit, even when holistic review is employed. Consider examining your materials to ensure that your institution is clear and consistent about the relationship between these two factors in the decision-making process.

### Importance and Context — High School and Student

**The second and third most important factors were consideration of high school and student context.** High school context includes the number of graduates going on to postsecondary educational institutions from a specific high school, the number of AP courses offered/or AP test-takers, and the number of students on free and reduced-price lunch. Student context includes information about a student's background beyond the four walls of the classroom, including first-generation education status and family income.

#### CAMPUS IMPLICATIONS:

- ✔ It will be critical to continue efforts within the enrollment office to refine and enhance the quality of information available to institutions regarding context. Consider any and all sources of data on high schools beyond what is normally transmitted in secondary school class profiles.

## Types of Nonacademic Factors Most Often Used

The types of nonacademic factors most frequently used are performance factors and attitudinal constructs. Performance factors include leadership, discipline, organization, teamwork, etc. Attitudinal constructs include interests, values, beliefs, adaptability, and social and cultural sensitivity.

### CAMPUS IMPLICATIONS:

- ✓ Colleges should seek to clearly describe the dimensions of nonacademic factors they use, and how those factors support their institutional mission and goals. Tying the use of the factors to desired outcomes can help both ensure consistency in evaluation and clarity of communication to both campus and external constituencies.

## Additional Findings

- Public institutions were more likely to report academic factors, followed by high school and student contexts, as the most commonly used indicators in admission decisions.
- Some of the most selective private institutions were more likely to attach less weight to academic factors because nearly all applicants were admissible. In addition to high school and student contextual factors, private institutions were more likely to also consider performance factors such as leadership roles and levels of engagement in high school and community.
- Private institutions were more likely to consider attitudinal factors such as self-efficacy, personal interests, and intercultural sensitivity.

## Implications for Future Research

Based on the case studies, relatively few schools had undertaken studies of the nonacademic criteria they use in admission decisions. Through the following, we see a great opportunity in helping colleges define, collect, measure, and understand the efficacy of their use of nonacademic factors:

- Model conceptual frameworks;
- Methods to both collect and assess these factors;
- Research designs to test whether the factors are associated with desired outcomes.

# Appendix

## Case Study Institutions Classifications

### Public Institutions

- 1. Urban Research University (URU):** This is a major public research university located in the downtown area of a major metropolitan university. It has large first-time, first-year enrollments as well as transfer students. It also has many graduate programs and a medical school. It is described as a *very selective* university by *Barron's Guide* at the undergraduate level.
- 2. Highly Selective Public Multiversity (HSPM):** HSPM is a major public research university. It is classified as a *most competitive* institution in *Barron's Guide* for the admission of first-time, first-year students. It also enrolls large numbers of transfer students and has many graduate programs.
- 3. Flagship State University (FSU):** This is a large major public university in the state in which it is located. It enrolls large numbers of first-time, first-year students, transfer students, and graduate students. For first-time, first-year students, this institution is considered to be a *very selective* university by *Barron's Guide*.
- 4. Metropolitan Public University (MPU):** This is a large comprehensive master's degree- and baccalaureate-granting public university. MPU has a strong transfer mission, but it also enrolls a large number of undergraduates. It is considered a *less selective* university by *Barron's Guide*. Many of its policies, including admission, are set by a system-level office.

### Private Institutions

- 5. Nontraditional Private College (NPC):** This private college is a well-regarded undergraduate institution that has been test-blind in that it has never required the submission of SAT® or ACT test scores. It is classified by *Barron's Guide* as a *most competitive* institution. Because of its long history of being test optional, it has had many years of experience using nonacademic factors.
- 6. Private University (PU):** PU is a regional, midsized, primarily undergraduate institution. It is described as a *competitive* university with respect to admission by *Barron's Guide*.
- 7. Highly Selective Private University (HSPU):** This institution ranks among the most highly regarded and most selective private universities in the nation. It is a research institution that enrolls large numbers of undergraduate and graduate students.
- 8. Church Affiliated University (CAU):** CAU is a large private institution affiliated with a religious body. It also has a large undergraduate and graduate student population. It is classified by *Barron's Guide* as a *most competitive* institution.
- 9. Highly Selective Private Liberal Arts College (HSPLAC):** *Barron's Guide* classifies this private institution as *most competitive*, and it is focused primarily on undergraduate education.
- 10. Private Technical College (PTC):** PTC is a small private college that focuses on technical education. *Barron's Guide* classifies it as a *most competitive* institution. It enrolls primarily undergraduate students.

## Contact Information:

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