COLLEGE APPLICATION WEEK ACTIVITY

Admissions Sorting Game
Why GPA Isn’t The Only Thing That Matters in College Admissions

TIMING
before CAW

AUDIENCE
9-12 students & parents

DURATION
30-40 minutes
GOAL

The Admissions Sorting Game encourages students to explore a variety of factors that are weighed by an admissions committee when making decisions to admit, waitlist or deny a student admission, especially to a four-year college or university. This mock admissions simulation is one way to initiate a conversation about the steps they can take during high school to show they are ready for college.

AGENDA

5 minutes: Opening discussion
20-30 minutes: Play the game
5 minutes: Closing discussion

MATERIALS

Instructions & Discussion Tips (pages 3-6)
Qualifications for Admission (pages 7-8)
Admission Candidate Cards (pages 9–26; print double-sided)

SOURCES & MORE INFORMATION

http://www.nacacnet.org/studentinfo/articles/Pages/Factors-in-the-Admission-Decision.aspx
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/patrick-oconnor/dont-count-on-a-hook-to-g_b_5111360.html

This activity is updated and adapted from Mary Lee Hoganson’s “The Great Sorting Game,” which was published by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in 2003.

Special thanks to Erica Johnson, Director of Admissions at Lewis & Clark College, for her assistance in updating the activity.
Before starting the simulation, lead a brief discussion on the factors students think might be important to an admissions committee.

There is no need to go into great detail at this point—that will come as the activity moves along.

Ask just a few questions:

1) What do you think is the most important thing that colleges look for when they decide who will be admitted?

2) What are some other things that might matter to colleges?

3) Do you think there are any things a student might do during high school that would prevent a college from ever admitting them?

Choose 9 volunteers to be admission candidates and 1 volunteer to be the Director of Admission.

- Randomly hand out one GPA card to each of the admission candidates and ask them line up at the front of the room, in order of GPA (lowest to highest). Ask them to hold the card so the group can see the large GPA number, and the volunteer can see the qualities.

- Give the list of qualities to the Director of Admission; this person will be responsible for reading the qualities to the group.

The rest of the group is the Admission Committee from “Best University.” The committee has reached the end of the admissions season and has 9 amazing applicants left. There is room to admit only 3. The final candidates are standing in front of them, in GPA order.

Remind the committee that all are excellent candidates, but that if they were to make the decision on GPA alone, those with the top three GPAs would be admitted. However, Best University believes that grades aren’t the only factor that determines whether a student is prepared to succeed, so the committee will be making the admissions decisions based on personal qualities and other academic and extracurricular qualifications.

1) The Director of Admissions reads each quality/qualification out loud, and the candidates exchange places as per the director’s instructions. (Note: if more than one person is moving up at the same time, the highest candidate should move first; if more than one is moving down at the same time, the lowest candidate should move down first.)

2) After each quality and move, stop to discuss why each quality benefitted or hindered a candidate.

3) After all the qualities have been read and candidates have been sorted, note the new order of the candidates. Remind them the top three will be admitted; the middle three will be waitlisted, and the bottom three will be denied.

4) Provide an opportunity for Q&A, with special attention paid to the qualities and qualifications that students can control.

5) Ask students to consider how this new information will factor into their four year plan.
DISCUSSION TIPS

As the game progresses, you’ll want to lead a discussion about why each of the characteristics helps or hinders an applicant. Consider the following:

1. **You have taken as many challenging classes as your high school offers**
   A more rigorous high school curriculum better prepares students for the rigors of a college classroom. Taking challenging courses indicates a student is willing to do what’s necessary to succeed. Colleges pay attention to what’s available to students, so they aren’t penalized for attending a school that doesn’t offer as many options as another might.

2. **You play the oboe and you’re good at it**
   Sometimes the conductor really does need to fill a critical spot in the orchestra. Colleges need to be sure their orchestras, teams, theater departments, etc. can perform to the best of their ability, so they recruit and admit students who can help with that.

3. **You chose to take math and science classes during your senior year**
   This is about rigor—and about ensuring that students don’t give up on important core courses, even if they aren’t strictly required for high school graduation.

4. **You clearly stated that this college is your first choice by applying Early Decision (which is a binding agreement that says you’ll attend if admitted)**
   Colleges want students who they know will attend, and Early Decision programs are one way to determine which students will.

5. **(and 6.) You plan to major in psychology or in Pre-Med**
   In some schools, the most popular majors (psychology and Pre-Med are often among these) have too many students. This can make it difficult for colleges to have enough course sections or to ensure that students have academic advisors in their field of study. Sometimes, colleges need to reduce the number of students in a particular major and they do this making it harder for those students to be admitted.

6. **You plan to major in a STEM field like chemistry, computer science, engineering, or mathematics**
   Everywhere you turn, people are talking about the need for more STEM majors. Colleges (and their admissions committees) are paying attention, too!

7. **You had trouble finding someone to write your college recommendation letters because you don’t know your teachers well**
   Recommendation letters help the admissions committee learn more about a student. When teachers know their students well, they can better advocate for them.
9. When you submitted your college applications, you forgot to change the names of the colleges to which you were applying
   Sometimes the small things make a big difference! Proof-reading college applications is an important part of the process.

10. Your brother is a sophomore at this college
    Many colleges appreciate and respect their history and traditions. Being a legacy (having a close relative—usually a parent, grandparent, or sibling who attend the college) shows that there is a tradition of attending that college in the family, and some colleges consider that when making admissions decisions.

11. You thought they meant it when they said the optional essay was optional, so you didn’t write it
    If a college gives applicants an opportunity to share more about themselves by writing an “optional” essay, a student should always take them up on it. Here’s a good motto: nothing is optional!

12. Your college essay about sports focused on your coach instead of on your own athletic growth
    College essays should always give the admissions committee more information about the applicant, so they should focus on something a student did, learned, or discovered about himself, rather than about another person.

13. You wrote the best essay of the year - it was passed around the admission office because it was so fantastic
    The essay is never the thing that gets a student in (or keeps them out), but a well-written essay can make a big difference in the committee remembering an applicant and advocating for them.

14. You plagiarized your AP US History paper and got caught
    Plagiarism and cheating are unacceptable in high school and in college.

15. You will be the first person in your family to attend college
    Colleges care about building diverse student bodies because it helps ensure more interesting class discussions and a better learning environment for everyone. Students who are the first in their family to go to college are just one group of students that colleges seek to enroll.

16. (and 17.) You participated in an enriching summer program between your junior and senior years; You have not participated in any extracurricular activities, don’t have an afterschool job, and don’t have responsibilities to care for younger siblings
    Being active and engaged as a high school student is an indication that a student will be active and engaged as a college student. All colleges want active and engaged students.

18. Your afterschool activities include 4-H leadership and caring for your younger siblings
    Colleges need student leaders on their campuses, so they are interested in students who show leadership qualities in high school. Remember that there are many different ways to exhibit leadership.
19. You are an Eagle Scout or Gold Award winner
   College is a lot of work and requires persistence and a willingness to tough it out through challenging times. Students who have earned major awards have shown they can persist and accomplish their goals.

20. You are a varsity athlete; if you are a varsity athlete who took second at the regional competition in your sport
   Especially for students who plan to participate in college sports, being a strong athlete matters in the admissions process. But even for those who don’t plan to play in college, athletic participation shows a level of commitment and perseverance that colleges want to see in their students.

21. You got a "D" in an academic course at the end of your junior year
   Grades do matter. And colleges prefer to see students improve over time, rather than have their grades decline. It doesn’t have to be a deal-breaker, though! Students who share the circumstances of their misstep (and what they did to make up for it) are more likely to be considered for admissions than someone who doesn’t say anything at all.

22. You emailed the admission representative to ask questions and tell them about your interest in their school (and in the case of the student who got a “D,” you offered an explanation of that grade)
   More and more, admissions committees are paying attention to “expressed interest” from applicants. Most students apply to more than one college, so they want to know that a student who applies is actually interested in attending their school (in other words, they want to know the student isn’t just applying to lots of schools without putting much thought into it). One of the ways they determine that a student is interested is by monitoring how much contact a student has with the admissions staff. Email is one way to do that, so is visiting a college or meeting with a representative at a college fair.

23. You are a legal resident of North Dakota
   Remember that colleges want diverse student bodies. That includes having geographical representation, too! (North Dakota is one of the smallest states, and one that sends very few students to college out-of-state, so North Dakotans are relatively rare on college campuses—this can give them an advantage in admissions.)

24. You never gave your counselor or GEAR UP coordinator personal information to use when writing your college recommendation letter
   Recommendation letters matter! The more someone knows, the better the letter they can write.

25. Your last name is Knight - the name on the library is Knight - and it's not a coincidence
   Some people give a lot of money to colleges to help them improve academic programs, build new buildings, or simply to pay for the cost of running the school. Donations matter—and fair or not, sometimes they help to ensure a spot in the class for a son or daughter of the donor.
QUALIFICATIONS FOR ADMISSION

The Director of Admissions read the following qualities in order, and volunteers move up or down the row accordingly.

If...
1. You have taken as many challenging classes as your high school offers, move up 2 spaces.
2. You play the oboe and you're good at it, move up 1 space.
3. You chose to take math and science classes during your senior year, move up 1 space.
4. You clearly stated that this college is your first choice by applying Early Decision (which is a binding agreement that says you'll attend if admitted), move up 2 spaces.
5. You plan to major in psychology, move down 1 space.
6. You plan to major in Pre-Med, move down 1 space.
7. You plan to major in a STEM field like chemistry, computer science, engineering, or mathematics, move up 2 spaces.
8. You had trouble finding someone to write your college recommendation letters because you don't know your teachers well, move down 2 spaces.
9. When you submitted your college applications, you forgot to change the names of the colleges to which you were applying, move down 4 spaces.
10. Your brother is a sophomore at this college, move up 2 spaces.
11. You thought they meant it when they said the optional essay was optional so you didn't write it, move down 1 space.
12. Your college essay about sports focused on your coach instead of on your own athletic growth, move down 1 space.
13. You wrote the best essay of the year - it was passed around the admission office because it was so fantastic, move up 3 spaces.
14. You plagiarized your AP US History paper and got caught, move all the way to the end of the line and stay there for the remainder of the game.
QUALIFICATIONS FOR ADMISSION

15. You will be the first person in your family to attend college, move up 2 spaces.

16. You participated in an enriching summer program between your junior and senior years, move up 2 spaces.

17. You have not participated in any extracurricular activities, don't have an afterschool job, and don't have responsibilities to care for younger siblings, move down 3 spaces.

18. Your afterschool activities include 4-H leadership and caring for your younger siblings, move up 1 space.

19. You are an Eagle Scout or Gold Award winner, move up 2 spaces.

20. You are a varsity athlete, move up 2 spaces. If you are a varsity athlete who took second at the regional competition in your sport, move up 1 more space.

21. You got a "D" in an academic course at the end of your junior year, move down 3 spaces.

22. You emailed the admission representative to ask questions and tell them about your interest in their school (and in the case of the student who got a “D,” you offered an explanation of that grade), move up 1 space.

23. You are a legal resident of North Dakota, move up 3 spaces.

24. You never gave your counselor or GEAR UP coordinator personal information to use when writing your college recommendation letter, move down 1 space.

25. Your last name is Knight - the name on the library is Knight - and it's not a coincidence, move all the way to the front of the line and stay there.
4.0
4.0

- You thought they meant it when they said the optional essay was optional so you didn't write it

- You have not participated in any extracurricular activities, don't have an afterschool job, and don't have responsibilities to care for younger sibling

- You are a legal resident of North Dakota
3.9
3.9

- You plan to major in Pre-Med

- Your college essay about sports focused on your coach instead of on your own athletic growth

- You participated in an enriching summer program between your junior and senior years
3.8
3.8

• You have taken as many challenging classes as your high school offers

• You plan to major in psychology

• When you submitted your college applications, you forgot to change the names of the colleges to which you were applying

• You plagiarized your AP US History paper and got caught
3.7
• You chose to take math and science classes during your senior year

• You had trouble finding someone to write your college recommendation letters because you don't know your teachers well

• You thought they meant it when they said the optional essay was optional so you didn't write it

• You never gave your counselor or GEAR UP coordinator personal information to use when writing your college recommendation letter
3.6
3.6

• You clearly stated that this college is your first choice by applying Early Decision (which is a binding agreement that says you'll attend if admitted)

• Your college essay about sports focused on your coach instead of on your own athletic growth

• Your afterschool activities include 4-H leadership and caring for your younger siblings

• You emailed the admission representative to ask questions and tell them about your interest in their school
3.5

- You play the oboe and you're good at it
- You plan to major in a STEM field like chemistry, computer science, engineering, or mathematics
- Your brother is a sophomore at this college
- You participated in an enriching summer program between your junior and senior years
3.4

- You have taken as many challenging classes as your high school offers
- You will be the first person in your family to attend college
- Your afterschool activities include 4-H leadership and caring for your younger siblings
- You are a varsity athlete
3.3
3.3

- You wrote the best essay of the year - it was passed around the admission office because it was so fantastic

- You are a varsity athlete and took second at the regional competition in your sport

- You got a "D" in an academic course at the end of your junior year

- You emailed the admission representative to ask questions and tell them about your interest in their school (and offered an explanation of your "D" grade)
3.2
3.2

- Your brother is a sophomore at this college

- You are an Eagle Scout or Gold Award winner

- Your last name is Knight - the name on the library is Knight - and it's not a coincidence