

## Personal Qualities and Academic Experiences: Predictors of Academic Success

### Traditional Academic Predictors:

High School (HS) Grades

Rank

Total GPA

GPA Core Courses

Admission Tests

SAT® I: Reasoning Test

ACT

SAT II: Subject Tests

Other

### Supplemental Achievement Predictors:

HS honors

Community achievement

Athletic achievement

Leadership

Creative achievement

Follow-through

Work experience

Personal statement

writing

content

Other Achievement Test in HS

### Admission Ratings:

Interview rating

Special talent (art, science)

Special attribute (overcame  
hardship, rich experiences)

### Goals and Plans:

Important Goal

Career

Intellectual

Creative

Physical

Leadership

Social

Uncertain Career Plans

Educational Aspirations

### Background:

Gender

Ethnicity/Race

Residence

Socioeconomic status (SES)

Alumni ties

School size

School type

School quality

college-going rate

achievement

Aid

Early decision

Close-tie school

Came for interview

College courses in HS

Adapted from Willingham, W.W. 1985. *Success in College*.  
New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

### Study and Overall Findings:

- Willingham (1985) study of the relationship of preadmission characteristics of students was conducted across nine colleges with over 25,000 applicants and 4,800 admitted students.
- Ratings by college staff were influential in admission decisions, but students so identified were not likely to achieve higher grades or persist into sophomore year at a rate higher than would be predicted by HS grades and test scores.
- At the most selective institutions, various personal qualities played an important role in selection, whereas colleges rejecting fewer applicants relied less on these qualities.
- Minority status, college affiliation (e.g., alumni), and ratings by admission staff were more highly related to admission decisions than other sources of data on personal qualities.
- Once HS grades and SAT scores are considered, four additional achievement measures can add to predicted college success: (1) follow-through (persistent effort and achievement in several out-of-class HS activities—extracurricular), (2) HS honors, (3) well-written essays, and (4) strength of HS essays.

## Research Summary

- Together, these four measures accounted for an additional 25 percent of variance above and beyond SAT and high school rank (HSR) in predicting college success.
- Follow-through appears to be a useful method of combining students' extracurricular activities into a single objective measure (a five-point rating was used with anchors, see pg. 213, note 4 of Chapter 5 in Willingham).
- For this study, a composite criteria of college success was developed at each college by faculty committees.

criteria*	r	reg. weight
College honors	.41	.24
Dept. honors	.30	.07
Appointed leader	.36	.19
Elected leader	.33	.20
Scholastic ach.	.27	.12
Physical ach.	.90	.05
Organizational ach.	.25	.08
Other independent ach.	.40	.23

\*When other forms of success were added, they did not improve the model.

- Advantages to such a composite measure of academic success include:
  - it considers various types of achievement
  - it is more reliable than faculty nominations of successful students
  - it is more predictable
  - it allows for identification of equal proportions of successful students across colleges

- Persistence within colleges was not highly related to achievement measures or even college grades. The overwhelming majority of students who withdrew from these colleges were academically successful at the time of their departure.
- SAT is the best predictor of departmental honors (usually a significant project or piece of work), and HSR is the best predictor of college honors (usually GPA). However, departmental honors is a qualitatively different measure of academic success than GPA, because it may provide a measure of what students can accomplish of importance in their field.
- SAT and HS rank predicted cumulative college GPA as well after four years as they did for freshman year. However, cumulative college GPA became less predictable from all preadmission measures each year.
- Two probable reasons for the decline of all measures in predicting upper division grades are that students with poor grades often migrated to departments that had higher grade distributions and that grades go up in many departments for upper level courses. A substantial portion of the decline in predicting upper-level grades is caused by these trends. Lower division GPA is a better predictor of graduate school admission and nomination by peers and faculty.

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