

Mythbusters: Predicting College Admission

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One of the most frustrating myths about the application process to those of us at selective institutions is the notion that admission can be predicted. From students asking about GPA and standardized test ranges all the time, to the “chancing” that goes on in certain online forums, to the frustration of many who match our profile but aren’t admitted and can’t understand why, there’s a lot of misunderstanding about just what it is we do. This isn’t an accusation; I understand what a stressful and anxious process this is for students. You want to know what your chances are. And we try to make the admission process as transparent as possible, but there comes a point in selective admission when the process is just opaque — you can’t predict it.

It’s certainly possible for some universities — especially the larger public ones. If you have a certain GPA and test scores, you’re in. Some colleges even guarantee scholarships if you make certain numbers.

But at most selective institutions, that’s simply not the case. And I’m never more aware of it than at this time of year, when we’re actually in the process of reviewing applications and shaping a new class. This involves a lot of give-and-take, back-and-forth, holistic review, and a balance of objective and subjective factors.

Let’s be clear here. Richmond, like many selective, liberal arts colleges, has a highly competitive applicant pool. Academics are the number one factor in our process, and we have the freedom to select a class from among thousands of academically strong applicants. So don’t take the notion of holistic consideration further than you should; we consider students holistically *with academics as our number one factor*. Rarely, if ever, will personal qualities make up for poor grades or a lackluster curriculum.

That said, we could fill nine or ten Richmond-sized first-year classes with the number of academically qualified applicants we get each year. Most of our applicant pool is competitive academically. If your stats and numbers look similar to our profile or to admitted students, that’s great — but keep in mind that they probably also look similar to an even greater number of students who were not admitted.

Frankly, when it comes down to it, there’s not much difference (from our perspective) between the student with a 4.5 GPA and the student with a 4.4 GPA (assuming they are from the same school, with similarly rigorous curricula and similar test scores). They are *similarly qualified*. They are both excellent students who would thrive at Richmond. The question is, who do we want in our first-year class? This is where involvement, experience, character, essays, recommendations, and a host of other variables come into play. This is selective admission. We’re not going to pick the 4.5 just because of a slightly higher GPA. That would just be competitive admission — the big-school numbers-driven model — on steroids.

Trust me. Every year, we turn down applications with straight A’s in strong programs. We turn down thousands of applications that fall right into (and even above) our standardized testing ranges. And a quarter of our class each year comes in below the 25th percentile of our testing ranges (a self-evident statement, but I think people often pass over the significance of it). [Our profile](#) is there to give you a general idea of what Richmond students typically look like, but it isn’t a predictor of admission in any way, shape, or form.

Probably one of the *least* accurate things you can do is ask current students/your tour guide/alumni/random students in an online forum for their stats and try to measure yourself against them. This completely disregards context, grading scales, weighting scales, and many other factors that likely influenced our decision in their particular case. Plus, this year is a different year: we have a very different applicant pool than we did a few years ago (much larger, for one thing). And finally, once again, there are applicants every year who look academically similar and receive different decisions. That’s just the nature of selective admission.

So there’s really not much you can do but wait — and know that we take our jobs very seriously. We review each application with a great deal of care and thought, very aware of the significance of our decisions. Ultimately, we rely on the knowledge that there are many excellent institutions of higher education out there, and each one is going to select different students for different reasons. Everyone will have a home next year; our task is to make the best matches we possibly can for our community here at Richmond.

And this can’t be done by the numbers.