

# The Fallacy that Good Grades Lead to Great Colleges

## Top Tier Universities Value Leadership Experience in Student Applicants



Attention parents! One of the most significant college application misunderstandings is that strong GPA and SAT scores equate with top university invitations. Investing in tutors, pushing AP courses and never letting up on homework don't always work. While these things seem logical, selection criteria have changed in the last decade. While good grades alone used to secure invites from top schools, the weight has shifted, often missed by high school guidance counselors and even private consultants.

I interviewed admissions counselors from Stanford, Harvard, MIT, Yale, and Duke. I teach at USC, the Naval Postgraduate School and recently Pepperdine. Two of our sons are alumni of USC and Duke, so I've observed this issue from multiple angles. The reality is that with the value inflation of superior academic pedigrees, the qualities these schools seek in applicants also evolved. Intellectual aptitude alone doesn't cut it these days, as the competition for best-in-class students rises.

For example, Stanford, with an annual acceptance rate of only 8%, turns down many academically over-qualified applicants. One admissions counselor said, "No doubt **some parents are shocked when their valedictorian and perfect SAT scoring student isn't accepted, but we're looking for the well-rounded applicant, not just someone who focuses on grades.**" The counselor continued, "We know that most of the people who apply at Stanford could earn a degree here, but we want students who will make a difference on campus, not just take away a diploma." So while low GPA and SAT scores can keep an applicant from first round consideration, strong GPA and SAT scores alone are insufficient for being selected by desirable universities.

A USC admissions counselor said, "**We're more interested in 'who's' coming than 'what's' coming,**" meaning the person is more important than the stats. That's why parents need to look beyond academics to help their student build his/her college resume. One of the qualities top tier schools look for is leadership experience. Our work

---

*Most parents overlook the importance of a well-rounded resume in college applications, such as leadership training and experience.*

---

the last decade in identifying and developing students gifted in leadership offers an opportunity to assist parents and students in building their resume in a way that attracts top universities, beyond mere community service. Unfortunately, most parents perceive leadership development as an adult process, not adolescent.

Institutions seek students who'll *make a dent in the universe*, as Steve Jobs said. Leadership training early sets them up for significant impact now and for the rest of their lives, unlike many youthful activities. Academic impetus demonstrates a unique ability to be strong in a single area, but those who rise in society tend to be individuals who work well with others, can bring out the best in them, and possess the aptitude for leading teams and organizations. Therefore, leadership development is a sought-after quality among top tier academic institutions. The sooner that parents realize this change in qualifications, the better they can assist their children in honing their resumes. Investing in athletics and the arts is a high-risk venture in that very few qualify for college level scholarships. Top universities aren't naïve. They know that influential alumni offer a lot in terms of networking, public relations and donations.

Our focus at LeadYoung Training Systems and specifically the LeadYoung Institute in the Conejo Valley, elevates high potential young leaders, offering them a significant head start in their careers as leaders and their perceived value among educational institutions. Savvy parents understand that the best way to help their teen obtain a degree from a strong university is to make sure s/he has a well-rounded resume. Executive training and demonstrated leadership are specifically valued among top tier schools.

-Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D., Founder of LeadYoung Institute