

Study Shows Public School Students Do Better Than Private School Students in College Admission to Top US Universities

US public school students were admitted to top universities at a higher rate than private school students over the last two admissions cycles

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[Solomon Admissions Consulting](#), a top college admissions consulting firm, recently conducted a study, [College Acceptance Rates at Top 30 Universities of Public and Private School Students](#), where it determined that among students who worked with the college admissions consulting firm over the last two years, public school students were admitted to top 30 universities at a rate of 62.5 per cent, while private school students were admitted at a rate of 60 per cent.

Solomon Admissions used aggregate data to analyze the admit rates of 160 similar students who attended public and private high schools from across twenty-two states and who worked with the college admissions consulting company in 2018 and 2019. All 160 students had applied to at least one of the top 30 nationally ranked universities in Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. Students identified for the study earned comparable unweighted GPAs, course rigor and standardized test scores.

The results showed public school students who applied in Fall 2018 to the top 30 colleges saw an admit rate of 52.5 per cent, while private school students had a similar admit rate of 57.5 per cent. In Fall of 2019, however, the study showed public school students doing much better and achieving a 72.5 per cent admit rate to the top 30 colleges versus private school students who achieved a 62.5 per cent admit rate. Taken together, these numbers suggest there is no advantage regarding college admission from attending private school.

This study comes at an important time due to the attention placed on the selectivity among the nation's top universities and how that affects the choice between attending public or private high school. Cathleen M. Sheils, former director of undergraduate admissions at Cornell University and now a senior consultant with Solomon Admissions, commented on the findings, "This study demonstrates the reality that colleges, especially the highly selective, view applicants both within the context of their high school environment and the overall applicant pool, resulting in essentially similar acceptance rates for the two, with public school students even doing slightly better."

Sheils also noted this finding supports the experience of the Solomon Admissions consulting team comprised of former admissions professionals from the top universities examined in this study.

“Top colleges are looking for students who maximize and excel within the most rigorous curriculum offered at their individual high school. When reviewing applications, admission officers consider information provided on the ‘school profile’ submitted by the high school college counselor to colleges to which their students apply. High school profiles are important to admissions officers as they summarize the school in terms of courses offered, the grading scale, how GPA is calculated, average tests scores and the class size. Today most public and private schools do not rank their students, but colleges will know where an applicant falls academically within their class, since a GPA distribution graph is often found within the profile. When a student applies, this information is reviewed with each application and provides insight for admissions officers on how a student challenged themselves academically with the courses available at their high school. This is important as families believe that since most private schools do not rank, a student with many B’s on their transcript is ‘safe and won’t be evaluated harshly.’ Colleges are looking to see students taking the most rigorous courses and excelling in them at the high school they attend,” adds Sheils.

Dan Lee, co-founder of Solomon Admissions, notes that another factor leading to these results may be attributed to the higher density of students applying to top colleges from a private versus a public high school, leading to an oversaturation of applicants from the same high school, which impacts admission results. Lee says that if a student has the aptitude to be the big fish in a big pond at an elite private high school or boarding school, then they should attend. But if a student is like 99 per cent of students who don’t have the aptitude to get all ‘A’s at a top high school like Horace Mann School or a Choate Rosemary Hall, then that student is much better off being the big fish in a small pond at a lesser known school.

With admissions rates of public and private applicants at top schools being similar, you may be wondering if it is worth it to send your child to a private high school? Will it increase his or her chances of admissions to top colleges?

Sheils responds, “Our findings from this study support what admissions officers have long known: in and of itself, attending a private high school will not give a student an advantage in the college admissions process at top colleges.”

Sheils is careful to point out this decision depends greatly on the type of high schools being compared and the type of student making the decision. “Private high schools do tend to offer more individual academic support and may be able to provide greater academic challenge than your local high school; each of these features may be appropriate for those students who need it.” Conversely, there are many excellent public schools that also offer strong academic curriculums, some rivaling those of private schools. Even for those which do not, Ms. Sheils advises there are still ways to demonstrate to colleges you have the potential to excel academically. “Regardless if your high school is public or private, highly selective colleges will expect applicants to have challenged themselves academically and taken full advantage of the resources available at their school.”

Sheils works with students throughout high school to prepare them for the application process and often advises students who may not have access to advanced courses to pursue independent learning i.e. online or local college courses and independent research. “Colleges will always reward academic rigor, and the onus to find it always falls on the student. Just be mindful there’s no one single easy solution when it comes to college admissions,” notes Sheils.