

*Undergraduate Admissions Holistic Review:  
Principles  
FOR THE 2021-22 ENROLLING CLASS*

*FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY*



OFFICE OF  
**Admissions and Recruitment**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

**Philosophy ..... 3**

**Transcript Review ..... 4**

    High School Record..... 4

    College Record..... 4

    COVID-19 Impact ..... 4

**Essays..... 5**

**Standardized Test Scores..... 6**

    DET, IELTS, or TOEFL ..... 6

    ACT or SAT..... 6

**Non-cognitive Competencies (NCC) ..... 7**

**Letters of Recommendation ..... 8**

**Extracurricular Involvement and Leadership ..... 8**

**Additional Information and Materials..... 8**

**Positive Campus Contributions ..... 9**

**Diversity..... 9**

**Disclosure of Learning, Personal, or Medical Circumstances..... 9**

**Executive Order 54..... 10**

## **Philosophy**

The University of Wisconsin–Madison utilizes a holistic, competitive, and selective admissions review process that aligns with our mission. Our goal is to recruit, admit, and enroll a high quality and diverse incoming class. The academic record always comes first in our review, we also consider written essays, extracurricular activities, leadership involvement, letters of recommendation and standardized test scores when required or provided. Our primary commitment is to the residents of Wisconsin. We seek students who will add unique perspectives to the educational environment at UW–Madison, including members of historically underrepresented ethnic and racial groups, those from rural Wisconsin farm backgrounds, first-generation college students, veterans and those currently serving our country in the armed forces, women interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) majors, and international students. We are also looking for students with special talent in music, dance, art, design, athletics, or other areas of institutional need, which may vary from year-to-year. The Office of Admissions and Recruitment is charged with admitting and enrolling talented students that will thrive academically in any one of our eight undergraduate schools and colleges.

## **Transcript Review**

Whether reviewing freshman or transfer applications, we are looking for students who demonstrate strong academic ability. We evaluate candidates based on their high school and college (when applicable) records, valuing applicants who demonstrate strong performance in a challenging curriculum. An applicant's academic record should show challenging course work in multiple core subject areas while maintaining a strong GPA.

### ***High School Record***

In reviewing the high school record, keep in mind that high schools may use the terms honors, advanced, accelerated, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and/or other labels to identify their most rigorous course offerings. Some high schools do not label their competitive courses but will indicate the level of rigor on their school profile and/or website. A high school profile should provide background information about the high school and range of course offerings, grading scale, and graduation requirements. Depending on the high school, some students may seek other opportunities outside the high school course offerings if they have exhausted the curriculum or are looking for further academic challenges. Students may opt to take advantage of online high school or college course offerings or may choose to enroll in college courses (Dual Enrollment) offered within the high school or at a nearby college.

Competitive applicants are expected to complete four or more years of core academic coursework in English, math, social studies, science, and world (foreign) language. Generally, students who earn 'A's and 'B's in rigorous courses are considered competitive. In addition to grade performance, class rank (if provided) is also considered. In our holistic review, we utilize the weighted or honors GPA and class rank when provided which may give counselors a more accurate picture of where a student places within their graduating class in terms of both rigor and grade performance. When class rank is not provided, school profiles and grade distribution information can often serve as an accurate and reasonable substitute. Recognizing that not all schools are equal, a student's rigor, grade performance, and class rank will all be considered within the context of the high school and the student's educational history.

### ***College Record***

Competitive applicants are expected to take both breadth and rigor of course work increasing in difficulty appropriate for continued study at UW-Madison. Students taking course work in the core areas of English, math, science, literature, social science, and world (foreign) language are best preparing themselves for course work on our campus. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Our decisions on transfer applicants will also depend on the overall strength of our applicant pool, our ability to determine their fit within our academic programs, and our confidence in their ability to complete a four-year degree at UW-Madison within a reasonable timeframe.

### ***COVID-19 Impact***

Due to COVID-19 many high schools and colleges needed to adapt to a virtual or remote learning mode of instruction and along with it changes in grading polices. Some examples of this could be students being graded on a pass/fail or credit/ no credit scale. Passing grades on a student's record will not be viewed in a negative

light and grades earned in previous course work should be relied on to assess how a student might have performed in this subject area had they been in a traditional setting without the impact of a pandemic. In addition to considering a student's previous grades, we also consider the strain that remote learning may have on students especially those who may have limited access to resources such as WIFI, instruction by a teacher, or the ability to seek support from family members in the home. Context is an important element when reviewing a student's academic record and we continue to strive to understand the environment a student is learning in to best understand their challenges and likelihood for success, recent events included.

## Essays

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Students are expected to provide responses appropriate to the questions posed. In their writing, students may share additional information about unique circumstances or backgrounds, which may be considered in our holistic review to determine fit and likelihood of success at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Applicants' responses to two application essay prompts are required. Students who submit the Common Application will respond to one of seven essays below.

The 2020-2021 Common App Essay Prompts are as follows:

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]:  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

All applicants will also need to respond to this prompt:

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## **Standardized Test Scores**

### ***DET, IELTS, or TOEFL***

Applicants who have been instructed in a language other than English may be required to submit a standardized test score to demonstrate English proficiency. The Duolingo English Test (DET), IELTS and TOEFL measure the ability of non-native English speakers use and understanding of the English language as a student hears, speaks, reads, and writes in the university classroom.

We require freshmen applicants who were educated in non-English speaking countries to submit a DET, IELTS or TOEFL score unless English was the language of instruction for all courses in all years of secondary school. Transfer applicants will have the DET/IELTS/TOEFL requirement waived if they have successfully completed a college level English course at a U.S. College or University. Even if it is not a required part of the application, all scores submitted will be considered as supplemental academic information.

Over the last three years the middle 50% of admitted freshman scored 102-110 on the TOEFL which is roughly equivalent to DET scores of 120-130 (on a 160 scale) and IELTS scores of 7.5– 8 (on a 9.0 scale). Applicants who score in this range or close to the range are considered competitive if the student has demonstrated exceptional areas of strength in our holistic review. Though minimum scores are not published on our website, it is important to be aware minimum scores are in place to ensure that students have a level of English that will allow them to be successful as a student on campus. Minimum DET is 105, IELTS score is 6.5, and TOEFL score is 80.

### ***ACT or SAT***

The ACT or SAT as a requirement for freshman applicants has been suspended until Spring 2023 and continues to be optional for transfer applicants. To minimize bias our application review processes, ACT/SAT scores will be suppressed in the initial read of an applicant. First reviewers will not be presented with these scores so they can consider all applicants using similar materials and focusing on the academic record as the primary indicator of a student's readiness and competitiveness for admission to UW-Madison.

ACT and SAT scores will be used in quality analysis, defer reviews, and wait list reviews, if students have indicated they wish scores to be considered as part of their application review. Quality analysis is done once files have been through a first read. The purpose of this processes is to ensure quality of admission decisions and the shaping of the class to incorporate institutional priorities and diversity has been achieved. Quality analysis is conducted by a seasoned team of admission counselors and leaders.

When using ACT or SAT scores in admission decisions, it is important to consider the history of these exams and what they are designed to measure. Both the ACT and SAT were designed to provide a measurement of a

student's likely hood of success in college. Research indicates that ACT/SAT scores are only a valuable predictor of a student's first year in college. For this reason, ACT/SAT scores are one factor in many that are considered during our review when provided.

- The ACT was designed as an *achievement test*, founded in curriculum developed to measure what a student has learned. It covers material that the student should have been exposed to during high school and demonstrates the student's foundation of knowledge to indicate what they are ready to study in college.
- The SAT was adapted from an intelligence test and originally developed as an *aptitude test*. The most recent SAT, first administered in March 2016, was redeveloped to focus more on curriculum taught in the high schools. The focus is on analytic skills and evidence-based reading and writing.

When using ACT and SAT scores, the highest ACT composite score or the highest SAT summative score from one test date is considered. If an applicant submits both an ACT and an SAT score, consider how each compare to our middle fifty percentile for admit freshman from the past three years. Statistics show that the middle fifty percentile of our admitted freshman in 2018, 2019, and 2020 scored 28-33 on the ACT and 1340-1480 on the SAT. We also consider the various sub-scores submitted as supplemental academic information, which can play a part in our deliberation.

### Non-cognitive Competencies (NCC)

As we de-emphasize ACT and SAT scores in our holistic review processes, we believe [REDACTED] on non-cognitive predictors of success in college is important to incorporate. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Slightly less than half of students who start college don't finish, so [REDACTED] wanted to figure out why some students stayed in college while others dropped out. Through research, [REDACTED] higher predictors of success in college for non-traditional students than either GPAs or SAT/ACT scores.

While reviewing a student's essays, letters of recommendation, involvement and other application materials look for the presence of these attributes.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Letters of Recommendation

One letter of recommendation is required written by someone who can attest to the student's academic ability, such as a teacher, school counselor, advisor, or faculty member. For students that have been away from education for an extended period, we will accept letters of recommendation from someone in a supervisory capacity. Like essays, letters of recommendation can provide valuable insight into how the student will engage campus opportunities. They may create a more complete picture of who the applicant might become as a student at UW–Madison elaborating on the student's academic promise, academic strengths, leadership potential and desire to be engaged in a community. In addition to looking specifically for qualities of academic promise and potential, note other non-cognitive factors like resolve, and determination. Letters of recommendation can provide context of a student's educational or home environment which can be valuable in understanding how students have progressed, thrived, or struggled with aspects of their academic record. Letters can attest to a student's determination and potential for success. Poorly organized or grammatically incorrect letters of recommendation are an indicator of the recommender's attention to detail and not the applicants. Reviewers are reminded not to hold this against an applicant.

## Extracurricular Involvement and Leadership

We are looking for students who are involved, whether in their schools, communities, or places of employment. Students, who are engaged in their communities and schools, are more likely to be involved on our campus. There are varying opportunities for involvement depending on where students live and go to school. While some students may have seemingly limitless options at their disposal through their schools (clubs, organizations, sports teams, etc.), some students may have limited offerings from which to choose. Some applicants may be involved, and leadership related to employment, military duty, or family responsibilities.

Extracurricular involvement may look different for transfer applicants who may not share their high school activities and only share most recent involvement since going to college. Transfer applicants are more likely to have an employment record, family responsibilities, or other non-traditional involvement. No matter what the options, we look for students who have been engaged in activities outside the classroom. We value quality and depth of involvement over quantity including demonstrated leadership qualities not limited to leadership titles.

## Additional Information and Materials

Students may choose to submit additional information beyond the required materials. This could include an additional essay, writing samples, resume, portfolio, or any other item the student or someone on behalf of the student submits as part of the application. These additional materials are considered within the holistic review process adding further information about the student's talent, interest, or situation beyond what is asked in the application.

The Common Application allows students to indicate if they would like to provide additional information by indicating yes to either or both below questions.



*Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces. For more information, check out our [COVID-19 FAQ](#). Do you wish to share anything on this topic?*

*Do you wish to provide details of circumstances or qualifications not reflected in the application?*

Responses to these questions will appear below the two required essays on the application. Students utilizing the UW-System application may provide this information as a separate email or as part of their required essay. This information should be used responsibly and as it was intended, which is to add context to struggles students might have faced impacting their academic performance, course selection, extracurricular activities, or other situations.

## **Positive Campus Contributions**

The Wisconsin Idea is the notion that education should extend beyond the walls of the classroom and impact people's lives for the better. We seek students who will be leaders in carrying the Wisconsin Idea forward by engaging in high impact practices, our history of activism, and service to others. Passionate students who demonstrate eagerness to explore and embody these principles are valued in our process for their potential to enrich our campus community. When assessing the likelihood of an applicant to contribute to campus positively, consider how a student's interests, goals, talents, and perspective align with our campus's priorities, values, and aspirations.

## **Diversity**

Diversity is proven to enhance learning outcomes for all. Our goal at the University of Wisconsin–Madison is to enroll a student body that is both talented and diverse. Diversity is broadly defined at UW–Madison and in our admission process. We desire to enroll more students from a variety of cultures from across the U.S. and around the world. We also seek to enroll students who identify with race and ethnicities who are underrepresented in the population of the State of Wisconsin. This includes African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese), and other ethnicities. The inclusion of underrepresented students strengthens and stimulates the learning environment for all, adds to the vibrancy of campus, and is an important part of UW-Madison's mission. We also consider the geographic location, unique cultural traditions, and international living and learning experiences of our applicants. Our hope is to enroll students from every county in the state of Wisconsin, all 50 states, and a range of countries worldwide. We consider students who have interests in areas of need to our campus community such as talent in dance, design, music, and art; and women interested in STEM. We remain dedicated to students who come from rural farm backgrounds, who are differently abled, who are serving or have served in the armed forces, as well as adults returning to higher education.

## **Disclosure of Learning, Personal, or Medical Circumstances**

Applicants may choose to disclose a learning, personal, or medical circumstance. Students typically disclose by writing about their story and/or diagnoses in their essays, or they may choose to submit medical documentation. The University of Wisconsin–Madison offers support for students with learning, personal, or medical circumstances through the McBurney Disability Resource Center, UW Health Services, and other additional campus resources.

An applicant's disclosure of a learning, personal, or medical circumstance should be considered in conjunction with a student's academic competitiveness. Consider this information as you do other stories of perseverance and determination as shared in essays, additional materials, or letters of recommendation. This information provides context and should inform our decision but not be the determining factor. Students who have a diagnosis or who are currently utilizing services at their educational institution may benefit from support services provided by McBurney Disability Resource Center. Students who are competitive and have demonstrated academic excellence resulting in admission may be referred to McBurney or other services on campus but are not required to take advantage of these services.

It is illegal to discriminate against a student based on disability. It is important to note that if a parent, teacher, or guidance/school counselor discloses information about a candidate, we cannot refer the student to the McBurney Disability Resource Center unless the applicant also makes the disclosure. Students we offer admission to who we believe will be eligible for and benefit from services may be referred to McBurney for follow-up. Students who are admitted and need interpretative services or physical accommodation should be referred to McBurney so they may begin setting up these services for the student in anticipation of their arrival on campus.

### **Executive Order 54**

As UW–Madison employees, we are mandated to report child abuse or neglect. Staff training on Executive Order 54 Mandatory Reporting occurs annually and is available online at <https://media.wcupds.wisc.edu/mandatedreporter/>. Admissions counselors will most likely become aware of these situations through the written essays provided as part of the student's application or a conversation with a student. If you become aware of a case of child abuse or neglect, you must report it to UW–Madison Campus Police as outlined in training. If you have questions about when and how to report a case, consult with the EO 54 liaison or a member of leadership. Reporting in a timely manner is required.

###