

Study: How students of different backgrounds use strategies to strengthen college applications

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High school students are increasingly using multiple strategies to enhance their college applications, including AP exams, SAT preparation courses or materials, and volunteerism and other extracurricular activities. Image courtesy of trinityprep.org.

Over the past 25 years, the higher education system in the United States has grown more competitive, with students trying to gain admissions to the most desirable institutions and institutions vying for the most desirable students. During this time period, high school students across the country—particularly those from families of higher socioeconomic status—have increasingly used multiple strategies to enhance their

college applications, finds research led by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The research, published online in *Research in Higher Education*, also finds that elite colleges are increasingly taking these application-boosting activities into account, and that this may be contributing to socioeconomic stratification in [college](#) admissions.

"The direct effect of socioeconomic status on enrollment in selective colleges is weakening at same time as strategies to enhance applications are strengthening," said Gregory Wolniak, director of the Center for Research on Higher Education Outcomes at NYU Steinhardt and the study's author.

Years of research show that students from families of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to attend college—particularly more selective institutions—thanks to a variety of factors, including academic preparation, attendance at higher performing schools, and other social, cultural, and financial resources available to families with more means.

In addition to their traditional coursework, students often try to make their college applications more competitive through what the researchers call "college enhancement strategies," including Advanced Placement (AP) exams, SAT preparation courses or materials, and volunteerism and other extracurricular activities.

Wolniak and his colleagues sought to better understand how socioeconomic status and college enhancement strategies affect students gaining admission to college, and to selective institutions in particular. Using two national datasets following [high school students](#) into college, one from the 1990s and one from the 2000s, the researchers studied the relationships between these factors and how they changed over time, a

period marked by rising college costs and increasing demand for [higher education](#).

The researchers found that students from high socioeconomic backgrounds use more college enhancement strategies compared with other socioeconomic groups, even after controlling for academics and a host of demographic background differences.

In addition, some—but not all—college enhancement strategies predicted college enrollment beyond the effect of academics. SAT instruction predicted four-year college enrollment in the 1990s, while extracurricular leadership activities and AP exams predicted enrollment in the 2000s. Surprisingly, volunteering failed to predict college enrollment, contrary to prior studies on the benefits of community service.

No single enhancement strategy predicted enrollment in selective colleges, but overall high use of enhancement strategies proved to be an important factor, suggesting these strategies may be working in combination when it comes to selective college admissions.

Aligning with earlier research, the study found that coming from a higher socioeconomic background significantly improved the likelihood of enrolling in a four-year college, even after accounting for academics, enhancement strategies, and other demographics. Yet, while socioeconomic status predicted enrollment in selective colleges in the 1990s, it did not in the 2000s, which may mean that [socioeconomic status](#) is becoming less of a factor in students' pathways into elite colleges.

"Socioeconomic status, in and of itself, continues to be a stratifying force in college enrollment, though one that appears partially offset by the growing influence of enhancement strategies," Wolniak said.

The researchers stress the need to improve access to strategies known to enhance college enrollment, such as AP courses and exams, for high school [students](#) from all backgrounds.

"Targeting schools that are under-resourced and unable to offer such enhancement could have a substantial positive influence on [college enrollment](#)," Wolniak said.

Provided by New York University

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