

When the 99th Percentile isn't Good Enough

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I was on an online forum where a student was trying to figure out whether to apply to Duke or Washington University in Saint Louis. And, of course, there was discussion of his chances of getting in. The student had outstanding academic credentials, including a 34 ACT score. I pointed out that while that was fine, his credentials were really just the minimum required for entry into these schools. Another student indicated that a 34 ACT score as a "minimum" was obviously ludicrous.

The problem here is that students don't see all the numbers. Most never get past the fact that the 34 ACT puts the student in the 99th percentile. How could the 99th percentile be the minimum for anything?

Dream Colleges

Let's start with the "anything" part of the question.

In this case, we're talking about colleges students with a 34 ACT might be inclined to apply to. Let's say these are often some of the most prestigious and competitive colleges in the country.

There are 44 colleges that accept 20% or fewer of applicants. If you exclude the military academies and those where the low acceptance rate isn't because of "prestige," along with any with missing test scores, you end up with the 38 colleges listed below. Let's call them "dream" schools.

Now before I go any further, the numbers I'm going to present aren't meant to be precise but rather good enough working estimates. I'm not trying to prove something statistically. I am trying to get people to understand the scope of the numbers of people involved, because apparently quite a few in the 99th percentile don't.

Anyway, I think the 38 dream schools serve as an excellent pool of colleges that students with a 34 ACT would believe they are worthy of, if not actually deserve to go to after all of their hard work.

If everyone is above average than the average is...

Yes, I said a 34 should be considered the minimum requirement. Here's why.

The lower 25th percentile ACT scores for these dream colleges ranges from a low of 28 to a high of 34. Only four schools were below 30.

The top 75th percentile ACT score ranges from a low of 32 to 36. The score is below 34 at only nine of the schools.

At this point, I suspect many of the 99'ers are thinking that these scores just mean the hordes of students rejected by these dream colleges each year simply don't have the numbers to be accepted. And that's probably true for the majority. But you really need to understand how many people can be in the minority.

So let's get to the guesstimating part.

Just how many students score a 34 ACT?

According to IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System), the freshman financial aid cohort for these dream colleges is 53,725. That's probably close enough to the actual freshman class for our purposes here.

In 2017, these schools reported a total 946,580 applicants. The two UC's had 187,197 by themselves.

But we're not actually really interested in the applicants to these dream schools. It's the qualifications of those that are admitted that matter.

According to the ACT, there were 20,499 graduating seniors in 2017 with ACT scores of 34.

There were 95,658 with scores between 32 and 36.

There were 296,369 with scores between 28 and 36.

Even if the guesstimates underestimate the size of the freshman classes for the dream colleges this still means that a significant minority, in the tens of thousands at least, of students with ACT scores that they think should get them into the schools, will actually be denied.

Of course, not all the students with high scores will be applying to just these 38 schools. But then again, we haven't taken into account students who just take the SAT or have higher SAT scores they're going to submit. And then there's the fact the ACT numbers don't include international students.

There are a lot of 99ers out there

In other words, students with high test scores need to face the reality that they are more likely to be rejected by a dream college than accepted. Unless, of course, they have something else to add to their applications other than just test scores.

This is why I argued that the test scores are the minimum requirement. The 99ers really need to figure out what distinguishes them from others with similar test scores and why

the dream colleges would care. Because numbers matter, but not always the way people think they should.

Dream Schools

Amherst College	Northwestern University
Barnard College	Pitzer College
Bowdoin College	Pomona College
Brown University	Princeton University
California Institute of Technology	Rice University
Claremont McKenna College	Stanford University
Colby College	Swarthmore College
Columbia University in the City of New York	Tufts University
Cornell University	University of California-Berkeley
Dartmouth College	University of California-Los Angeles
Davidson College	University of Chicago
Duke University	University of Notre Dame
Georgetown University	University of Pennsylvania
Grinnell College	University of Southern California
Harvard University	Vanderbilt University
Harvey Mudd College	Washington University in St Louis
Johns Hopkins University	Wesleyan University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Williams College
Middlebury College	Yale University