

High School Students' Views of AI in the College Application Process

Jeff Schiel

Introduction

Examples of college readiness indicators include applicants' high school grades, essays, and college admissions test scores. Of these, high school grades are most prominent in the college admissions process. Recently, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) reported that high school grades were the most important factor in admissions decisions, with 74% of its member colleges viewing grades as considerably important. Over time, the significance placed on high school grades appears to be increasing: Ten years prior, only about half (52%) of NACAC's member colleges held this same perspective of grades' importance (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2023).

However, grades, despite their prominence, have imperfections. Evidence of a phenomenon known as grade inflation, which occurs when there is an increase in grades over time but no concomitant increase in ability (Bejar & Blew, 1981), has been around for many years. For example, ACT presented evidence of this phenomenon thirty years ago (Ziomek & Svec, 1995) and on several subsequent occasions (Woodruff & Ziomek, 2004; Sanchez & Moore, 2022; Sanchez, 2023, 2025).

Concerns over grade inflation continue, and recently the accuracy of high school grades as a measure of student achievement has been questioned. For example, a study of grade inflation that used longitudinal data from students in Washington state found significant changes over time in grades and a noticeably weak relationship between grades in math and achievement, which was measured by scores on state-administered assessments (Goldhaber & Young, 2024). In addition, the study found a significant increase in the proportion of students receiving grades of A and B, even though these students were not meeting grade-level expectations based on their state assessment scores. The authors caution, however, that it is unclear how to interpret their findings because of the potential influence of factors such as chronic absenteeism and the lack of measures, besides test scores, to compare grades to. Another example of a recent study that questioned the accuracy of high school grades is Sanchez (2025), where it was found that the ability of high school grade point average to predict first-year college grade point average deteriorated with grade inflation. The author describes the implications of the findings via an example of two students who have the same high school grade point average: The student who attends a high school that has a high level of grade inflation will have a lower predicted first-year college grade point average than the one who attends a school that has a low level of grade inflation. This pattern is especially noticeable for students who have relatively low high school grade point averages.

Different types of grading systems occur in secondary education and include the traditional A–F system, as well as proficiency grading, in which a student's goal is to achieve mastery in each of

a series of learning standards. Because many colleges and universities have chosen to make college admissions test scores optional, there are new challenges involved in the assessment of college readiness, including careful consideration of how to interpret grades from various systems (Erbes et al., 2021).

To summarize, grades appear to be gaining prominence in college admissions, even as their accuracy is being questioned and their interpretation is becoming more challenging. Moreover, it is possible that students' use of artificial intelligence (AI) in their high school coursework has some bearing on the accuracy of grades as a measure of student achievement. The use of AI is common among students and is increasing. For example, one study reported that in 2024, 26% of students between the ages of 13 and 17 used ChatGPT to help with their schoolwork. This is double the percentage observed in 2023 (Sidoti et al., 2025), but it is small compared to those from a more recent study: Between January and May, 2025, the percentage of high school students who reported using generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, Claude) for schoolwork increased from 79% to 84% (Adair, et al., 2025).

Current Study

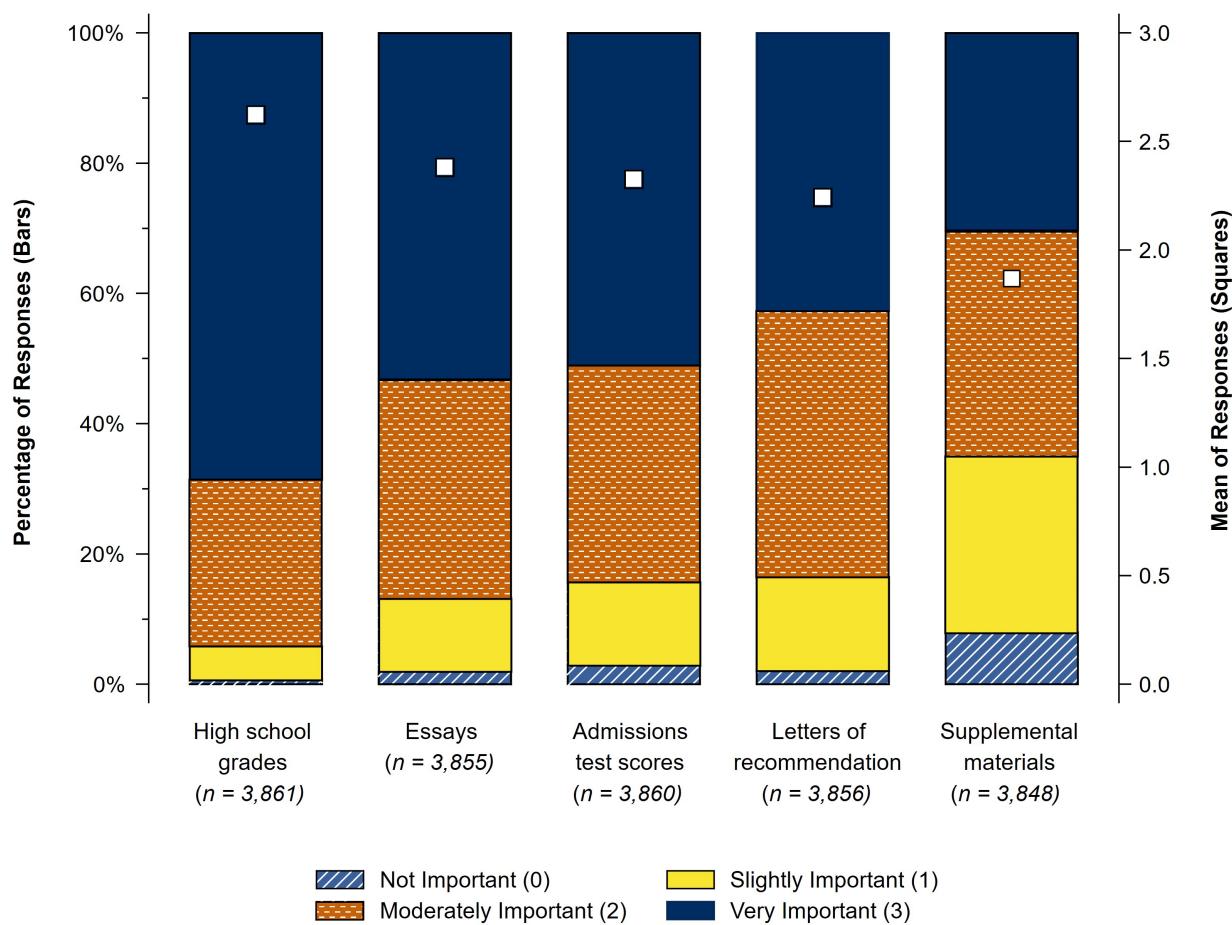
College admissions decisions for high school students could be influenced by the interplay among college readiness indicators and their perceived importance, the perception that high school grades have declined in accuracy, and the influence of AI on grades and other indicators, such as essays. The goal of this study was to gain insight into high school students' perspectives on readiness indicators and AI's potential influence in the college application process. Research questions included the following:

- How do students view the importance of high school grades and other college readiness indicators?
- What do students think about the accuracy of grades, given that AI can be used to complete school assignments?
- Do students believe that using AI in the college application process gives applicants a significant advantage?

In this study, high school students shared their perspectives through an online survey on the importance of college readiness indicators and whether they believe AI can influence aspects of the college application process. A total of 4,903 students responded to the survey. Additional information about the respondents and the survey is provided in the Technical Appendix.

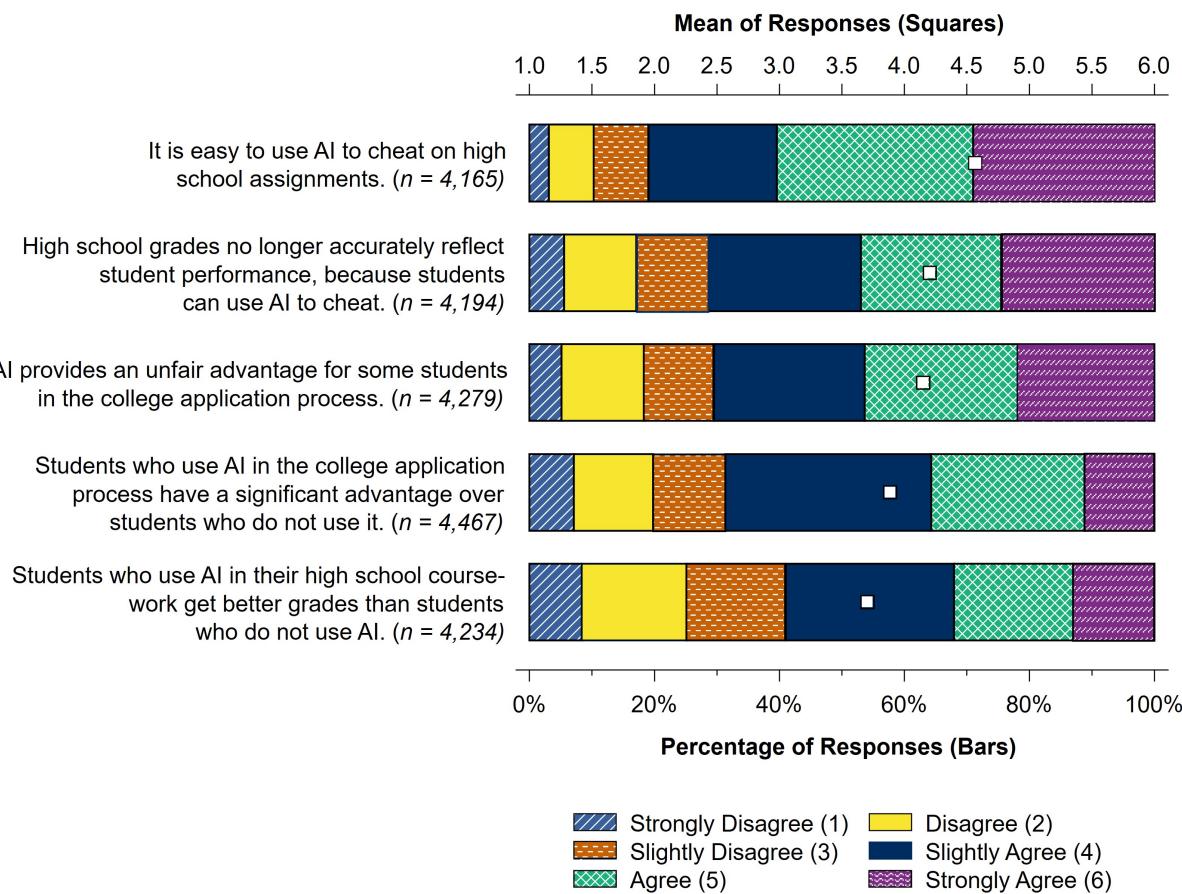
Results

Approximately two thirds (69%) of students in this study indicated that high school grades are very important in the college application process (see Figure 1 and Table A2). Grades were viewed as more important than other indicators, such as essays (53% indicated these are very important), admissions test scores (51%), letters of recommendation (43%), and supplemental materials (e.g., creative writing projects, a description of an app a student developed, school capstone projects; 30%).

Figure 1. Importance of College Readiness Indicators

Mean importance ratings for each of the college readiness indicators are denoted by the white squares in Figure 1. Mean ratings ranged from 2.62 (high school grades) to 1.87 (supplemental materials) and confirm the relative importance of the indicators, based on students' feedback.

Although high school grades were perceived as important, they were also perceived as being able to be influenced by AI. Nearly three quarters (71%) of students at least slightly agreed that high school grades no longer accurately reflect student performance, because students can use AI to cheat (mean agreement rating = 4.20; Figure 2 and Table A3). In addition, 81% at least slightly agreed that it is easy to use AI to cheat on high school assignments ($M = 4.57$), and 59% at least slightly agreed that students who use AI in their high school coursework get better grades than students who do not use AI ($M = 3.70$).

Figure 2. AI's Influence on High School Grades and the College Application Process

When considering the use of AI in the college application process, 70% of students at least slightly agreed that AI provides an unfair advantage for some students ($M = 4.15$), and 69% at least slightly agreed that students who use AI in this manner have a significant advantage over those who do not ($M = 3.89$; Figure 2 and Table A3).

It is possible that students who are higher achieving academically would have different perspectives on the importance of college readiness indicators and AI's influence in the college application process than would students who are lower achieving academically. To investigate this, student data were disaggregated according to ACT® test score category (i.e., bottom quarter of the distribution of test scores for students who responded to the survey, middle half, and top quarter).

Students gave relatively high importance ratings to high school grades, irrespective of ACT score category. However, students whose test scores were in the top quarter had different views of AI's influence on high school grades: They were significantly less likely than their lower scoring peers to agree that students who use AI in their high school coursework get better grades (top quarter $M = 3.53$, middle half $M = 3.72$, bottom quarter $M = 3.84$; top quarter vs. middle half: $q = -3.34$, $p = .0024$, $d = -0.13$; top quarter vs. bottom quarter: $q = -4.65$, $p <$

.0001, $d = -0.21$).¹ Higher scoring students were also significantly less likely than lower scoring students to agree that high school grades no longer accurately reflect academic performance, because students can use AI to cheat (top quarter $M = 3.98$, middle half $M = 4.23$, bottom quarter $M = 4.31$; top quarter vs. middle half: $q = -4.12$, $p = .0001$, $d = -0.18$; top quarter vs. bottom quarter: $q = -4.73$, $p < .0001$, $d = -0.22$).

Discussion

Some college readiness indicators can be influenced by AI. For example, a person writing a letter of recommendation for an applicant could choose to use AI only for editorial assistance or choose to use AI to generate the entire letter. Likewise, an applicant could use AI for their admissions essay.

High school grades were identified by students in this study as the most important college readiness indicator, which is consistent with the general perspective of NACAC's member colleges (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2023). Despite their importance, grades can be especially affected by the use of AI in coursework, as students' views suggest. A majority of students at least slightly agreed with statements about the following issues: The ease of using AI to cheat on high school assignments (81%), the decrease in high school grades' accuracy in reflecting student performance because students can use AI to cheat (71%), and the better grades that occur as a result of using AI in high school coursework (59%). All these could have bearing on the dependability and interpretation of grades in the college application process.

Students are not the only ones questioning the accuracy and interpretation of high school grades. Recent studies have drawn attention to ongoing increases over time in grades without parallel increases in achievement as measured by college admissions test scores (e.g., Sanchez & Moore, 2022; Sanchez, 2023), a link between A and B grades received and the failure to meet grade-level expectations on state-administered tests (Goldhaber & Young, 2024), and the need for careful consideration when interpreting grades from various systems, such as traditional and proficiency grading, as college readiness indicators (Erbes et al., 2021).

Although admissions test scores are viewed by students and others as less important in the college application process than grades and essays, they have some advantages. By design, the interpretation of admissions test scores is stable over time, unlike that of grades. Moreover, admissions test scores are unique among college readiness indicators in that they are highly unlikely to be affected by AI. For example, although students may use AI when preparing for the ACT test—12% of students in this study who reported that they prepared for the test also said that AI was involved in their preparation—the opportunity for students to use AI while taking the ACT test is intentionally restricted. Students take the ACT test under standardized conditions in

¹The effect size reported in this study is Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988). Generally accepted guidelines for interpreting effect sizes are as follows: An effect size (in absolute value) of 0.20 or less is small, 0.21–0.49 is small to medium, 0.50–0.79 is medium to large, and 0.80 or more is large.

which electronic devices (e.g., cell phones, smart watches, any device with Wi-Fi or internet capabilities) are prohibited from being accessed during testing or break times.

As high school students continue to use AI, and as this technology becomes more broadly applied in society, it will be important to monitor AI's effects, both perceived and actual, on college readiness indicators and the perception of fairness in college admissions. It is essential that high school grades, essays, admissions test scores, and other indicators retain their ability to identify students who not only are ready to begin college, but who also show potential for education and career success.

In addition, students' use of AI is relevant to college readiness beyond its potential to affect readiness indicators. Overreliance on AI could be detrimental to learning and improving important skills, even if it is used in an ethical manner and not as a means of cheating on school assignments. In one study, for example, a majority of high school students at least slightly disagreed with statements about the use of AI tools having improved their communication (54%) and problem-solving skills (55%), and nearly half (47%) held this opinion with respect to their critical thinking skills (Schiel, 2025). Another study reported that a majority of parents, teachers, and students in grades 9 through 12 (72%, 71%, and 64%, respectively) worry that the use of AI could weaken important academic skills such as writing, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and conducting research (Laird et al., 2025). Such concern seems legitimate because Gerlich (2025) found a significant negative relationship between the use of AI tools and critical thinking skills: As AI tool usage increased, critical thinking skills were reduced. A phenomenon known as cognitive offloading—which occurs when cognitive tasks are delegated to external aids, reducing engagement with deep, reflective thinking—was determined to play a significant role in this relationship.

Future Research

Students who had relatively high ACT scores had different opinions of AI's influence on high school grades than did students who had relatively low scores. Higher scoring students were significantly less likely than their lower scoring peers to agree that (a) students who use AI in their high school coursework get better grades than students who do not use AI, and (b) high school grades no longer accurately reflect academic performance, because students can use AI to cheat. It is not clear why these differences occurred. Perhaps it is because higher scoring students have more confidence in their academic ability or are less reliant on using AI to complete school assignments. Alternatively, perhaps higher scoring students are more likely to attribute academic success to internal causes (e.g., ability, effort) rather than to external causes (Marsh, 1986) such as AI tools. Future research could produce some insights. For example, perhaps data such as high school students' levels of academic confidence, their attributions for academic success, their admissions test scores, the extent of their use of AI in coursework, and their views of AI's influence on high school grades could be collected from a sample of students to study statistical relationships among these variables.

Limitations

It is common to observe high rates of survey nonresponse in research that is based on data from online surveys. Approximately 6.1% of the sampled students responded to this study's

survey. Although this rate is typical for surveys of ACT test registrants, it is possible that the opinions reported by the relatively small number of respondents differed in some way from those of the nonrespondents.

In addition, 98% of the students in this study reported that they plan to attend college right after they graduate from high school. Students' views on AI might differ depending on whether they are college bound or not. For example, college-bound students might have more exposure to AI tools than students who are not college bound, have more knowledge of how AI can be used in high school coursework, and thus be more likely to believe that students who use AI in their coursework get better grades. Therefore, some of the findings of this study might not be generalizable to high school students who do not plan to attend college.

About the Author

Jeff Schiel, PhD, a lead research scientist at ACT, specializes in survey methodology and sampling. His research interests include the study of high school students' educational experiences and plans and their opinions on topics like AI.

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Technical Appendix

Sample

A random sample of 81,000 high school students nationwide was used for this study. These students had registered to take the June 2025 National ACT test. Ninety-eight percent of them indicated that they planned to attend college right after graduating from high school, and 5% reported that they had applied for admission to a college or university. A total of 4,903 students responded to the survey, for a response rate of 6.1%.

Student characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, and high school grade point average) are reported in Table A1 for the survey's target population, sampled population, sample, and respondents. All the characteristics in this table were reported by students and were collected when they registered for the National ACT.

Table A1. Characteristics of the Survey Population, Sample, and Respondents

Characteristic	Target population		Sampled population		Sample		Respondents		
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Race/ethnicity	American Indian/Alaska Native	718	0%	649	0%	367	0%	19	0%
	Asian	11,472	7%	10,254	7%	5,979	7%	415	8%
	Black	14,699	9%	13,444	10%	7,723	10%	328	7%
	Hispanic	18,044	11%	16,260	12%	9,389	12%	510	10%
	Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	157	0%	137	0%	74	0%	6	0%
	White	97,201	62%	85,919	61%	49,794	61%	3,135	64%
	Two or more races	7,310	5%	6,550	5%	3,790	5%	240	5%
	Prefer not to respond	7,428	5%	6,338	5%	3,703	5%	240	5%
Gender	Unknown	253	0%	237	0%	181	0%	10	0%
	Female	90,193	57%	80,217	57%	46,258	57%	3,108	63%
	Male	65,302	42%	57,944	41%	33,830	42%	1,685	34%
	Another gender	230	0%	211	0%	106	0%	24	0%
	Prefer not to respond	1,509	1%	1,373	1%	773	1%	84	2%
High school grade point average	Unknown	48	0%	43	0%	33	0%	2	0%
	(A– to A) 3.5–4.0 or higher	117,980	75%	104,584	75%	60,987	75%	4,181	85%
	(B to B+) 3.0–3.4	23,450	15%	21,016	15%	12,135	15%	451	9%
	(B– to B) 2.5–2.9	6,683	4%	6,051	4%	3,521	4%	95	2%
	(C to C–) 2.0–2.4	2,463	2%	2,253	2%	1,303	2%	27	1%
	(C– to C) 1.5–1.9	531	0%	491	0%	279	0%	7	0%
	(D to C–) 1.0–1.4	129	0%	111	0%	56	0%	0	0%
	(D– to D) 0.5–0.9 or lower	23	0%	18	0%	11	0%	0	0%
Total		157,282	100%	139,788	100%	81,000	100%	4,903	100%

The target population ($N = 157,282$) included U.S. high school students who had registered for the June 2025 National ACT test. The sampled population ($n = 139,788$), which is a subset of the target population, excluded students who opted out of receiving non-transactional communications from ACT. It also excluded students who were in samples for other recent ACT surveys. A simple random sample ($n = 81,000$) was drawn from the sampled population. The respondents ($n = 4,903$) included students from the sample who responded to the survey and whose data were used in the analyses.

The sample and respondents differed on some characteristics. For example, students who reported that they had a high school grade point average of A– to A represent 75% of the sample but 85% of the respondents. It is typical in surveys of ACT test registrants for students who report higher grade point averages to respond at higher rates compared with those who report lower grade point averages. In addition, it is typical in these surveys for Asian and White students to respond at higher rates than Black and Hispanic students and for female students to respond at higher rates than male students.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was administered online to participating students in June 2025. The first question in this instrument was intended to identify whether each respondent was a student, a parent or guardian, or a school counselor. This question was needed because when caregivers and counselors assist with a student's ACT registration, they sometimes provide their own email address instead of the student's. Only those respondents who indicated that they were students were permitted to continue the survey. Other relevant items are listed below.

1. Do you plan to attend college right after you graduate from high school?
 - Yes
 - No
2. Have you applied for admission to a college or university yet?
 - Yes
 - No
3. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
Students who use AI in the college application process have a significant advantage over students who do not use it.	<input type="radio"/>					
AI provides an unfair advantage for some students in the college application process.	<input type="radio"/>					
Students who use AI in their high school coursework get better grades than students who do not use AI.	<input type="radio"/>					
High school grades no longer accurately reflect student performance, because AI makes it easy for students to cheat.	<input type="radio"/>					
It is easy to use AI to cheat on high school assignments.	<input type="radio"/>					

4. How important to you, in the college application process, are each of the following? (order of presentation of items was randomized)

	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important
HS grades	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Essays	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Letters of recommendation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Test scores (e.g., ACT or SAT)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supplemental materials (e.g., creative writing projects, a description of an app you developed, school capstone projects)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Before taking the ACT test, did you prepare in any way (e.g., by reviewing sample questions, taking practice tests, taking a test-preparation course, working with a tutor)? (This question is required.)

Yes
 No

6. Was AI involved in your test preparation? (For example, a test preparation course you took was described as AI-powered, or an online practice test used AI to provide you with personalized study tips.) (displayed only if “Yes” was selected for previous question)

Yes
 No
 I don’t know

Analysis

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from students’ responses to the survey instrument, information provided by students when they registered to take the ACT test, and students’ test scores. Data from the survey were matched by student ID to ACT registration data and test score data. Analyses were performed on data from the entire group of students who responded to the survey ($n = 4,903$). Percentages of responses were computed for all survey questions, and mean responses and standard errors of the means were computed for questions that had appropriate scales (Questions 3 and 4).

Data were also analyzed by ACT test score category (i.e., bottom quarter of the distribution of test scores for students who responded to the survey, middle half, and top quarter). For each multiple comparison of mean responses across score category, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with pairwise comparisons based on the Tukey-Kramer procedure was used. The test statistic yielded by this procedure is denoted in this report by q . Whenever a statistically significant difference was observed between a pair of means, an effect size was computed using Cohen’s d , with a pooled sample standard deviation as the denominator (Cohen, 1988, p. 66).

Descriptive Statistics

Table A2. Importance of College Readiness Indicators

Indicator	Not important (0)		Slightly important (1)		Moderately important (2)		Very important (3)		M	SEM	N
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%			
High school grades	25	1%	201	5%	987	26%	2,648	69%	2.62	0.010	3,861
Essays	77	2%	434	11%	1,294	34%	2,050	53%	2.38	0.012	3,855
Letters of recommendation	79	2%	556	14%	1,576	41%	1,645	43%	2.24	0.012	3,856
Admissions test scores	112	3%	494	13%	1,284	33%	1,970	51%	2.32	0.013	3,860
Supplemental materials	309	8%	1,043	27%	1,328	35%	1,168	30%	1.87	0.015	3,848

Table A3. AI's Influence on High School Grades and the College Application Process

Statement	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Slightly disagree (3)		Slightly agree (4)		Agree (5)		Strongly agree (6)		<i>M</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>N</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%			
Students who use AI in the college application process have a significant advantage over students who do not use it.	318	7%	566	13%	516	12%	1,471	33%	1,098	25%	498	11%	3.89	0.021	4,467
AI provides an unfair advantage for some students in the college application process.	220	5%	570	13%	475	11%	1,031	24%	1,047	24%	936	22%	4.15	0.023	4,279
Students who use AI in their high school coursework get better grades than students who do not use AI.	355	8%	712	17%	669	16%	1,140	27%	809	19%	549	13%	3.70	0.023	4,234
High school grades no longer accurately reflect student performance, because students can use AI to cheat.	232	6%	484	12%	480	11%	1,028	25%	943	22%	1,027	24%	4.20	0.023	4,194
It is easy to use AI to cheat on high school assignments.	129	3%	302	7%	364	9%	855	21%	1,308	31%	1,207	29%	4.57	0.021	4,165



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