

What employers really look for in recent college graduates

By [Sam Korach, Farmer School of Business at Miami University](#) 11:49 am EST July 22, 2015

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On college campuses across our nation, students long to understand what employers are looking for in the candidates they interview and hire. As the cost of college explodes and students graduate under mountains of student loan debt, the question has taken more importance than ever before.

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Students want to know:

- What role do grades really play in the recruitment process?
- Do extracurricular activities, varsity sports and jobs really matter — and if so, how are they factored in?
- How much leeway is given for students who may have a lower GPA, but a rich resume?
- How does an employer narrow down an entire book of resumes from a university's Career Center to 16 students who get the opportunity to interview when a recruiter comes to campus?
- What's the magic formula to get on the interview list — and to get asked to go on a second interview?
- Are different criteria required to land an interview versus ultimately landing a job?

The answers to these questions are critical in understanding how to create a resume, conduct a job search and map out a college journey. To separate myth from reality and finally get to the real answers, we decided to survey more than 200 recruiters of college graduates across a broad range of fields of study; some of the results may surprise you.

With the help of the nationally ranked Farmer School of Business, the Miami University Career Services office and the talent acquisition directors of Bloomberg's 2015 Top Places to Launch a Career, here's what we found:

YOUR GPA CAN LAND YOU AN INTERVIEW BUT WON'T LIKELY GET YOU THE JOB

“GPA CERTAINLY HAS A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT IN THE INTERVIEW SELECTION PROCESS, PARTICULARLY WHEN THOSE SELECTIONS ARE BEING MADE BASED SOLELY ON THE RESUME. ALL ELSE BEING EQUAL, A STRONGER RESUME WILL HELP DIFFERENTIATE A CANDIDATE AND HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE SELECTION PROCESS...ONCE A STUDENT IS IN THE JOB INTERVIEW, THE GPA WILL HAVE LITTLE BEARING ON THE OUTCOME. AT THAT TIME, IT IS MORE ABOUT HOW THE CANDIDATE ANSWERS THE QUESTIONS AND PRESENTS HIM/HERSELF TO THE EMPLOYER.”

– DAN BLACK, EY DIRECTOR OF AMERICAS RECRUITING

The interview is arguably the most critical aspect of recruitment process for both employers and applicants. The ways in which you can land an interview, however, can vary. When looking at the role of a student's grades, results indicated GPA was very important before the interview, but not so much after. This suggests that GPA can be your ticket into the interview, but afterwards, other factors ultimately land you the job. The study finds:

- 43% of companies have a formal GPA threshold (91% had that threshold at 3.0 or higher.) Looking at larger companies only (10,000-plus employees), 63% had a GPA threshold.
- The most common threshold was 3.0, with 42% of companies explicitly stating that was their threshold.
- 6% of recruiters stated their firm's threshold was a 3.5 or higher

So, a good GPA matters. That said, it appears to be more important before the interview, than afterward.

And in the final decision-making process,

- 91% value interview performance more than GPA in their ultimate hiring decision.
- Only 25% of employers thought that GPA was the first or second most important factor when reviewing an applicant.

TECHNOLOGY CAN MAKE IT TOUGHER FOR STUDENTS WITH A LOWER GPA

In the age of technology, some companies now utilize “applicant tracking systems” as a part of their recruitment strategies. Firms utilizing applicant tracking systems will have students apply online for

employment. In these cases, students are reviewed as a part of a searchable database, not from a traditional resume. In the majority of cases (59.4%), these employers require certain GPA thresholds to get an interview.

RELATED: [You have 6 seconds to grab a recruiter's attention and here's how to do it](#)

For students who have GPAs below their average GPA thresholds, this can create a challenge as these systems make it very difficult for students with lower GPAs to get the attention of the recruiter. The study found that a considerably higher amount of larger employers use computer-based screening than smaller employers. Creating personal relationships with recruiters and employees of their target firms seems to be the best way for a student with a lower GPA to secure an interview in cases where the company used an applicant tracking system. However, it was only 5% more likely (14% versus 9%) that job seekers would be able to get around the tracking systems with smaller firms than larger ones. Here's what the study found:

- 40% of large employers (greater than 10,000 employees) used computer-based screening.
- 15% of small employers (fewer than 10,000 employees) used computer-based screening.
- Of companies that use computer-based screening, 56% were unlikely to interview someone with a GPA below 3.0.
- Only 9% of large firms that used applicant tracking systems indicated that it was likely or very likely to get an interview with a GPA below 3.0 (the mean and median "minimum" GPA among employers interviewed).
- 14% of smaller firms that used applicant tracking systems indicated that it was likely or very likely to get an interview with a GPA below 3.0 (the mean and median minimum GPA among employers interviewed).

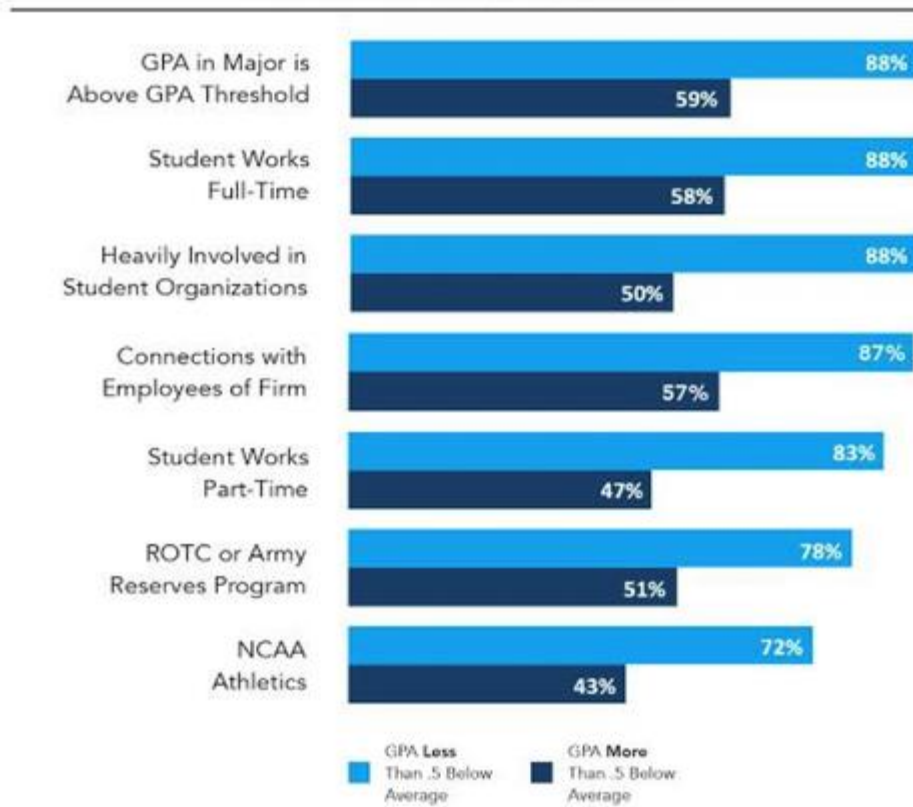
EMPLOYERS ARE WILLING TO BE FLEXIBLE IF A STUDENT'S GPA IS CLOSE TO THEIR THRESHOLD

One of the most revealing outcomes of the study was that firms value other factors more than GPA – after using GPA heavily to determine who was granted an interview. Getting into the interview room may not be as daunting of a task (if they are not screened out by an applicant tracking system) for those who heavily invest outside of the classroom in extracurricular activities, work experience and networking.

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The study created two scenarios for the recruiters. The first was when a candidate had a GPA that was less than 0.5 points below the average GPA of a typical hire. For example, if the average GPA of a hire by an employer was 3.5, this candidate had a GPA of 3.00-3.49. Recruiters showed that many candidates were at least somewhat likely to receive an interview if they had several different factors and were less than 0.5 points below the average GPA of a hire.

**Likelihood of Being Granted an Interview
When GPA Is Below Average Hire**



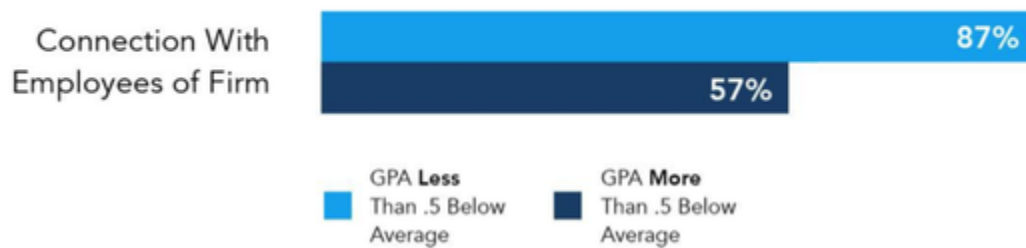
“WE DO HAVE A MINIMUM GPA BASED ON STATE CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR TEACHERS. BEYOND THAT, WHILE THE AVERAGE GPA OF OUR CORPS MEMBERS IS HIGH, WE’RE COMMITTED TO GETTING TO KNOW OUR CANDIDATES HOLISTICALLY AND UNDERSTANDING THE MANY FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE...ABOVE ALL ELSE, WE STRIVE TO GET TO KNOW EACH CANDIDATE AS A COMPLETE INDIVIDUAL – UNDERSTANDING HOW THEY’VE APPROACHED ACADEMICS, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, JOBS, COMMUNITY WORK, FAMILY COMMITMENTS AND SO ON.”

– SEAN WALDHEIM, VICE PRESIDENT OF ADMISSIONS, TEACH FOR AMERICA

CONNECTIONS AND PERSONAL INTERACTIONS STILL OPEN DOORS

Using the same scale in the question above, recruiters told us that personal relationships with employees of the firm still have significant weight in the interview process – and could dramatically enhance a candidate with a lower GPA’s ability to get an interview. So, regardless of advances in technology and the recruiting process, in general, personal relationships appear to continue to be tremendously important in the process.

Likelihood of Being Granted an Interview When GPA Is Below Average Hire



(Graphic by Alex Kendall)

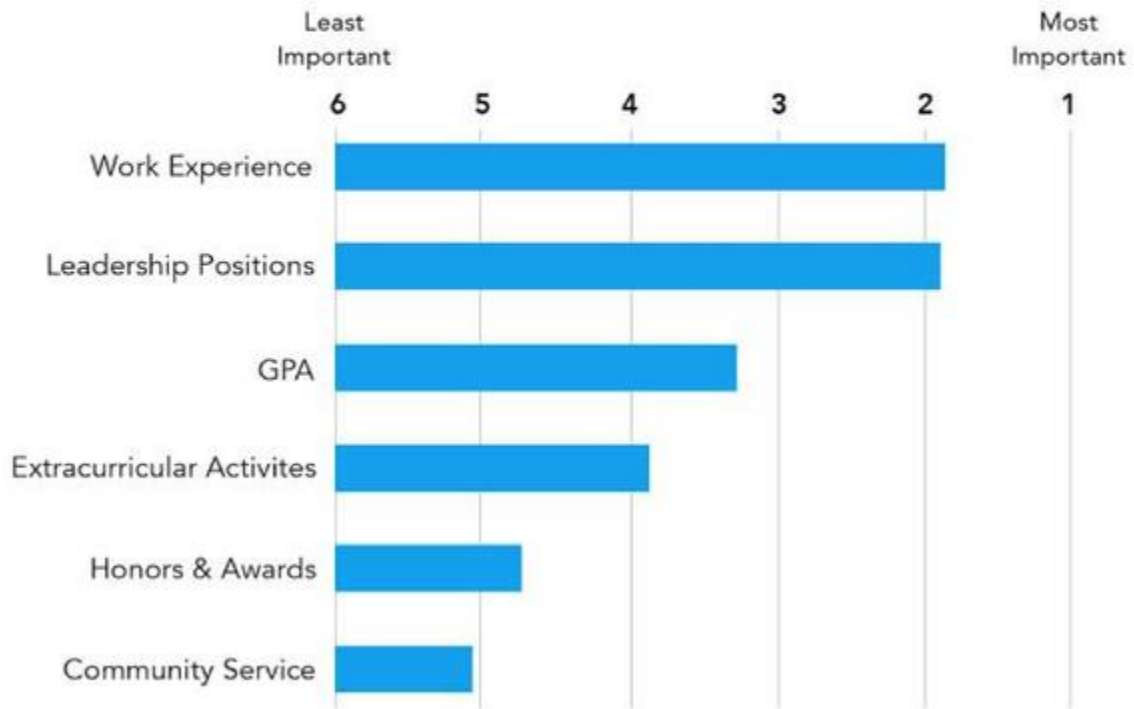
“OUR RECRUITING STRATEGY IS BASED ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS THROUGH A NUMBER OF CHANNELS ON CAMPUS, THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA, AND CONNECTIONS WITH DELOITTE EMPLOYEES WHO ARE ALUMNI FROM THEIR SCHOOL. THAT’S THE BEST WAY TO GET NOTICED AT DELOITTE – BUILD AND MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR RECRUITERS AND ALUMNI IN PERSON AND ON SOCIAL MEDIA.”

– PATTY POGEMILLER, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF TALENT ACQUISITION & MOBILITY, DELOITTE

LEADERSHIP AND WORK EXPERIENCE MATTER MOST IF YOU CAN LAND THE INTERVIEW

On average, employers resoundingly selected these two areas over GPA, with “Honors and Awards” and “Community Service” having the least impact. This is consistent with the fact that a strong majority of firms (63%) had defined core competencies that they were looking for in candidates. They were looking for specific skill sets, not just good grades. Community service — which many believe to be very important in the college selection process — did not matter greatly in the recruitment process. We asked recruiters to rank the importance of these various factors in their recruitment process from most important (1) to least important (6).

Average Rank of Importance by Recruiters (1 = Most Important, 6 = Least Important)



(Graphic by Alex Kendall)

CONCLUSION

Grades matter – perhaps more than ever in the digital age. So do personal relationships. However, a well-rounded college experience (with good grades) is the optimal approach to land the interview you want – and be offered a job as an outcome of that process.