

A Guide to US College and University Admission

(produced by the AAWE College USA Committee)

This guide is designed to assist students who are enrolled at schools which do not have a guidance counselor for American college and university admission. Students enrolled at schools which do provide a guidance counselor should follow the procedures established at their schools, but may find some useful information in this guide as well.

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I. Introduction

Applying to U.S. colleges and universities is a somewhat complex and time-consuming process, and therefore requires careful planning and research. However, if you do plan ahead, carry out the research, and work regularly throughout the application process, there is no reason you cannot do it successfully.

Selecting the right schools to apply to is probably the most important part of the application process, and you will need time to explore the many possibilities. In addition, the application itself asks for information over and beyond secondary school records, and may require some documents which have to be translated into English, so planning well ahead is essential in order to meet deadlines easily.

This guide will give you an overview of the admissions and college application process, with explanations, suggestions, and a calendar of steps you will need to take to insure success in gaining admission to the right school for you. There is also a brief glossary of commonly used U.S. educational terms, and a list of sources of useful information. In addition to the items included here, colleges to which you have applied may request additional information which you should always provide immediately.

II. Overview

U.S. colleges and universities decide whether or not to accept applicants on the basis of a number of things. The school record alone, no matter how good, is not the only thing considered by admissions committees. Admissions committees will assess the following:

1. Academic record

All colleges give major importance to the quality of the student's academic record. You should take the most challenging courses available to you.

2. Standardized tests

Standardized tests such as the SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests, the American College Test (ACT), and TOEFL may or may not be required. They are important but are evaluated in the total context of a student's school performance.

3. Extracurricular activities

Activities, which show strong involvement or where a student has an unusual aptitude, are also advantageous. **Attention:** It is important to consider and enter extracurricular activities as early as possible in middle school and high school. Admissions committees look for serious pursuit of one or more activities over several years, not just a scattering of activities picked up late for college admissions

purposes. These can be in the areas of music, the arts, sports, community, club, or church activities, or many others. Real involvement in something one cares about is the key.

4. School or community service

Service is highly recommended as colleges are looking for evidence that the student will make a contribution to the school community.

5. Essays

College essays permit the student to come alive in a way that grades and test scores do not. They are a very important component of an application. See below.

6. Summary and teacher recommendations

Teachers who know you well should write your recommendations. Select carefully.

7. Individual factors

There are individual factors that can play a role in college acceptance such as unusual talents or achievements, alumni affiliation or ethnic background.

8. Individual flavor

Equally important to all of the above is evidence that the student as an individual will make a contribution to the total college community. Admissions committees value individuality, self-reliance, responsibility and a sense of commitment.

An admissions committee reads all the parts of a completed application, which includes the following:

1. The student's **personal application form** (usually consisting of a several page summary of essential biographical information), and **essays/personal statements** on topics provided by the college. The student may also provide an additional resumé of extracurricular activities and /or portfolios of art work, or music recordings.

2. **Scores of College Board SAT Reasoning and SAT Subject Tests** or of the **American College Test (ACT)** sent directly at the request of the applicant to colleges to which he/she is applying. This can be done at the time of registration. (See the requirements of the colleges being applied to as to which test it would be preferable to take.) The **TOEFL** test of English proficiency is usually also required if a student goes to a non-English speaking school and has grown up in a non-English environment. You can register for all these tests online.

3. The **official transcript** of the student's high school marks (grades 9 to12), sent directly by the school, (or it may be officially stamped and signed by a school official and forwarded by the student, if necessary.)

4. A **secondary school report and summary letter of recommendation*** by a school administrator or head teacher.

5. **Letters of academic recommendation*** by (usually) two of the student's current or recent teachers.

6. An **optional letter** of personal recommendation from someone outside the school, usually in connection with the student's extracurricular activities.

7. **A personal interview** (usually optional, occasionally required.)

8. For non-US citizens, **certification of financial support** (proof of the ability to pay for the costs of the university and living expenses)

The **Common Application** permitting application to over 500 U.S. colleges and universities is available on the internet at: www.commonapp.org.

You should apply online whenever possible. If this option for a college of your choice is not available, the application can be downloaded and completed.

The application fee, which must be paid in U.S. dollars and drawn on a U.S. bank, must be included with the application. For online applications, you may pay with a credit card.

It is your responsibility to see that teachers complete recommendations and send them in on time, or give them to the person in your school who is dealing with your application materials.

The essay: The essay is probably the single most important item. The purpose of the college essay is to provide colleges with information not found anywhere else in the application folder. While many students dread this task, it actually gives you an opportunity to "come alive" for the admissions team. It is the only place they can hear your own voice. An essay that really works will show you are a person worth listening to.

The essay should be taken very seriously. This does not mean that only serious topics are acceptable. As long as essays are grammatically correct, there is no set style or subject matter. If you are able to show imagination, humor, freshness of opinion or perspective, so much the better!

While colleges vary in the number of words required, the essay generally must follow specified guidelines. Remember that precision, clarity, and brevity are far more impressive than wordiness. As Harry Bauld says in *On Writing the College Application Essay*, "In every good essay, the sentences and words are simple, the thinking vivid, the images detailed."

You should particularly avoid letting parents, teachers, or other adults interfere with the actual writing of the essay. Your best chance for showing spontaneity and enthusiasm is more likely obtained through your own language and method of expression. While teachers and parents may be consulted for questions of grammar, do not let anyone else write your essay! It must be a reflection of your own responses to the questions asked.

Don't wait until the last minute to begin work. Remember that you should write at least two drafts before your final proofreading.

ATTENTION!!!

- College/university application deadlines are those of the date of receipt of materials at the college/university in the US, **not** the date when you mailed the materials.
- All correspondence by air mail takes at least a week each way. Although applications can be made online, school transcripts and recommendation letters may have to be sent by regular air mail.
- Colleges and universities usually specify the date by which standardized tests must be taken to be considered for admission (SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Tests or the ACT). The last acceptable test date by which the tests must be taken can usually be found on a college/university's website. They are also listed with other information on colleges and universities on the Common Application website (see above). Registration deadlines for the exams are six to eight weeks ahead of the exam. For online registration, visit: sat.collegeboard.org
- ALL DOCUMENTS NORMALLY MUST BE IN ENGLISH. Check the application instructions. Recommendation letters may need to be translated.

Note that the calendars given below do not include English proficiency exams. If you are a non-native speaker of English, or have attended a non-Anglophone school, you will probably need to demonstrate English proficiency on some kind of exam, even if you are fluent. The TOEFL and other English proficiency exams are offered regularly throughout the year.

III. Calendar for 11th Grade (Junior Year)

This is in some ways your most important year. First of all, you are establishing your high school academic record. All U.S. universities look at your entire high school record (grades 9 -12), but the junior year is the last complete year you will have before colleges will be making their decisions about you. Especially in two-year programs like the IB and the French *bac*, you will be giving admissions people a first look at what you can accomplish as a more mature student.

Second, you must begin the process of choosing institutions to which you would like to apply. This can be an exciting and rewarding experience. It is also a demanding one as you will have to do quite a bit of research. This will, however, give you a chance to look at who you are, what you value, what you might want to do with your life. You will have to make some important decisions, and perhaps for the first time think about life on your own, outside the protection of family life.

A note about the “top” US schools: There is no single, official ranking of higher education institutions in the U.S. There are, however, many private rankings and surveys which are widely reported in the popular press. These rankings are usually based on such criteria as selectivity (defined by the average SAT scores, class rank or average grades in high school of students accepted to a school), professional qualifications of the teaching staff, success of graduates, etc. In spite of these seemingly objective criteria, the rankings can be very subjective. When referring to a ranking, make sure that you understand the criteria used. You can consult rankings to see groups of colleges similar in selectivity and other characteristics, but not for absolute individual hierarchical rankings. Never rely on a single ranking to determine your choice.

What all this means is:

A. You should be working seriously on your courses. For U.S. universities, the choice of courses you take is not as important as how well you do overall in your studies. (This is not so in European or Japanese universities where the choice can determine which institutions and programs you can apply to.)

B. There are certain special exams which you need to take. In October, there is the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), which can be taken at many international examination centers (see www.collegeboard.org for the testing center nearest you). This is very similar to the SAT (Reasoning Test), differing only in degree of difficulty. Thus it is an excellent opportunity to practice taking the multiple choice-type tests used in the U.S. under actual testing conditions. In addition, for U.S. citizens, it is the qualifying exam for the National Merit Scholarship Program. The SAT (Reasoning Test), the SAT Subject Tests, and the ACT are offered a number of times during the year, but as juniors, you will want to take SAT’s offered in January, May or June, or the ACT in December, April, or June.

C. You need to begin to identify those schools to which you will want to apply. This involves talking with people who have attended colleges which you are thinking about, looking at college web sites and catalogues, contacting colleges to obtain information which you cannot find, discussing choices with your parents, and possibly visiting colleges during vacations, or making virtual visits via the Internet. Depending on where you live, you can also attend a college fair such as those sponsored by the Fulbright Commission or the Council of International Schools, where representatives of about U.S. colleges are available to give information and advice. If college representatives visit your school be sure to attend. This is a valuable way to understand the scope of choices.

October - take PSAT exam.

December - review PSAT results

January -take the SAT (Reasoning Test), if desired

February - begin to look over college and university information.

March-May - consult college websites for information on schools which might be of interest to you.

April or June --take the ACT if desired, as alternate to SAT's

May or June - take the SAT (Reasoning Test) if you did not take it in January

Summer - visit schools if possible. Begin thinking about essay topics, and try a draft or two to get a head start.

Information on the requirements for admission, and application forms, can be found on all of the college websites as well as on the Common Application website. For each institution to which you wish to apply (usually 6 – 8), you will be responsible for initiating the procedures which will insure that the necessary materials are sent to that institution by the indicated deadlines.

IV. Calendar for 12th Grade (Senior Year)

The first trimester is most important, because these are the last grades which the colleges and universities will see before making final decisions. So do your very best!

Summer GET A HEAD START !!

Begin drafting essays. Register for the November SAT (Reasoning Test). Set yourself a timetable for working on college applications on a regular basis from now on.

Note: The ACT Test is an alternate to SAT tests, and it is given in September, October, December, April, and June. If colleges you are applying to require the ACT, check the ACT website for dates and registration procedures. Be sure to register for the ACT with writing supplement at least once.

September

- Continue drafting and revising essays.
- Contact those teachers whom you ask to write recommendations, and explain the online procedure or give them the necessary forms. Teacher recommendation forms all have parts at the beginning for you to fill out, including waivers of confidentiality (recommended). Don't forget to fill them out before giving them to the teacher.
- Contact the school official or head teacher whom you will ask to write the secondary school report and summary letter. You and your family may need to meet with this person to explain the application procedures you are following and the importance of the recommendation letter.
- Decide on a final list of eight to ten colleges to apply to. Find the application forms online on the Common Application website or individual college or university websites. (Colleges will no longer be sending application forms.)
- Attend a college fair, if possible, to meet representatives of colleges.

October

- You should now have chosen the colleges or universities to which you wish to apply, and should have begun to fill out your applications.
- **NOTE :** Early Decision or Early Action applications must be made by earlier dates than regular applications. Check the college websites for the appropriate deadlines. Since ED or EA applications are due by November 1, all material, including test scores should be ready to go by mid-October.
- Register for the December SAT Subject Tests (if SAT11subject tests are required by your college choices).

November

- The SAT (Reasoning Test) is given on the first Saturday in November, and will probably be the last one you can take to have the results in on time to the schools to which you are applying to regular decision. Plan to take the SAT Subject Tests in December. (Note: University of California schools have a November 30 deadline.) Early Decision application deadlines are usually November 1 or 15. Normal deadlines can be as early as December 15 but most are not until January 1 or later.
- If you are efficient and have followed these instructions, you should be able to have most, if not all of your applications ready by the end of November. You should be ready to send them in early December. There may be, however, earlier application deadlines to be considered for a scholarship. Check for special application deadlines for international students.

December

- Take the SAT Subject Tests, usually offered on the first Saturday in December.
- All of your application materials should be completed and submitted by the application deadlines.
- If you did not do well on your SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Tests, you may be able to retake them in January and request that a rush notification be sent to the schools to which you are applying. This costs extra, and, of course, you will have to register to take the January tests by the December deadline.

January

- Take the SAT (Reasoning Test) or the SAT Subject Tests in late January.

Late March/Early April

- You should begin receiving letters of acceptance or refusal.

May 1

- You must respond to schools which have accepted you or placed you on a waiting list.

V. The Application

Here is how to apply, once you have decided to which schools you wish to apply.

**BE SURE YOU RESPECT DEADLINES (especially those for international students)!
GET YOUR APPLICATIONS IN WELL IN ADVANCE IF POSSIBLE!**

A. For each college or university, fill out an online version of the application form and go over it with someone to make sure that it is correct. This includes the personal essay. You should ask someone to read your essays and make general suggestions, but the essay must remain your own work in your own words. When you are satisfied that the copy is filled out correctly, fill out the real form online, and the financial statement if necessary. File your application online, following directions given by the college. Payment for applications made online can usually be made by credit card.

B. Arrange with two teachers to write recommendations and have them fill out the proper forms, either online or on the paper forms. Since it is likely that you will be asking the same teachers to write recommendations for several institutions, it is best to have them write a general letter of recommendation which can be copied and mailed, or included in an online application. In that way teachers only have to fill out the relatively simple informational part of the necessary forms, and not have to write several full length recommendations. They can write letters in English, or in another language, in which case you should have the letter translated.

Note: Do NOT let the name of a college be included in the letter, nor in your own personal statements, since they will be used for a number of different colleges.

If any person is mailing materials for you, you should provide envelopes correctly addressed to the different colleges.

C. Do not forget the application fee, in U.S. dollars! Again, payment can be made with a credit card. Make sure that the teachers' recommendations have been mailed directly to the universities, if they have not been done online, and that your transcript has been sent to each institution to which you have applied.

D. When you take the SAT (Reasoning Test) and the SAT Subject Tests, or the ACT Test, and if necessary, English language proficiency tests, indicate in the section provided that you want the scores sent directly to the schools to which you are applying. This can be done when you register for the tests, or on site, the day you take the tests. Test scores **MUST** be sent directly by the College Board or the ACT offices. Scores can be sent later as well. This can be done when you register for the tests, or on site, the day you take the tests. You will find instructions on the College Board and ACT websites.

E. Where appropriate, arrange for an interview. Interviews with alumni living outside the U.S. are usually arranged for students once applications are made. Individual personal interviews are not now generally available on campuses. If you are not contacted for an interview, you can get in touch with the university who will then notify any local alumni representatives. (Not all colleges/universities have representatives, but many do.)

VI. Brief Glossary of Common U.S. Educational Terms

Bachelor's Degree - This is the first degree one can earn at the higher education level. It requires 120 credits worth of course work. A minimum of 90 of those credits and sometimes up to 45 credits must be earned in a major subject. The rest of a student's course work is divided up between general requirements which may be established by the college or university, and electives which the student may choose from the school's catalogue. Depending on the academic discipline, a student earns a bachelor of arts degree (B.A.) or a bachelor of science degree (B.S.) in a specific area, such as a B.A. in comparative literature or a B.S. in physics.

Credit - A credit is given for each 15 hours of formal studies in a recognized higher education institution in the US. Most courses "carry" (are worth) three credits. That is, they meet for 45 hours, usually three hours per week for 15 weeks, 15 weeks being the length of a normal semester. At the undergraduate level, students take five courses per semester, or 15 credits (5 x 3 credits). Some courses carry only one or two credits, and some up to six credits, so the number of courses can vary. But it is unusual for a student to take more than 15 credits per semester. Thus, students normally earn 30 credits per year (two, 15 credit semesters), and it takes four years to earn the required 120 credits for a bachelor's degree.

College - The post-secondary school institution where most high school graduates complete four years of college, with a B.A. or B.S. degree. In the U.S., this can be equated with university. Traditionally, colleges in the U.S. were small (300 - 2,500 students), four-year institutions where one went to get a well-rounded undergraduate education with a major in a broad area such as science or history or literature. This education prepared students either to enter the professional world, or to go on to do more focused and specific graduate work at another institution. Colleges tended to be small, although there are now a number of large ones. Most colleges now also offer a wide range of majors and many have graduate programs. Colleges generally emphasize teaching more than research.

Early Admission

Early Decision - a plan under which a student applies to the college of his/her first choice early in the fall, usually by November 1 or 15 of the senior year. The student agrees by a binding contract to enter that college if offered admission. Students are usually notified of decisions in mid-December. If not admitted in December, a student is often reconsidered for admission later in the year.

Early Action - This application plan follows essentially the same calendar of application and notification as Early Decision but does not include the binding contract. The college allows the accepted candidates until May 1 to accept or decline the offer of admission.

E.T.S. - Educational Testing Service - The center is Princeton, N.J., which handles all of the registration and score reports for the College Board tests.

Graduate level/degree - This refers to degree programs beyond the four-year bachelor level, generally called master's or doctor's degrees. There are many different kinds of degrees within these two categories, and the organization of studies varies greatly depending on the discipline and the type or design of the program. Most master's degrees and all doctorates require an original, lengthy research thesis. To graduate also means to finish a degree program.

Higher education - Higher education refers to formal schooling after high school. This could be a college or university or a technical school or vocational school. It covers both undergraduate and graduate studies.

Major - In the four years leading to a bachelors' degree, a student will normally take 40 courses, at least 10 of which will be focused in one discipline, or major. The idea behind this is that a well-educated person has been exposed to many different disciplines, and has studied at least one discipline in depth. A major may also prepare a student to go on to graduate level work in a particular field. Thus someone who wants to be an engineer may major in math at the undergraduate level and go on to do graduate work in an engineering school at a university.

Secondary Education - Secondary education refers to the four high school years, grades 9 - 12, usually called the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years. Normally these correspond to the ages of 14 - 17.

Social Security number- Identification number assigned to American citizens by the U.S. Government. Non-Americans who are intending to study in the U.S. should apply for a number at the U.S. Consulate in their country.

Undergraduate level – This is the first level of higher education, leading to a bachelor's degree in a specific discipline. It is usually organized as a four year program with two semesters each year from September to December and February to May. The four years are also called freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years.

University - A large (5,000 to 50,000 students) higher education institution composed of several colleges or schools, such as a School of Education or a College of Arts and Sciences. Unlike colleges, universities offer a wide variety of courses from engineering and agriculture to art and philosophy. Universities offer both undergraduate and graduate programs.

VII. Sources of Information on U.S. College and University Admissions

COLLEGE HANDBOOKS

Much information is of course available online. You may also wish to consult some college handbooks which provide factual information and some subjective comment on colleges and universities. Most handbooks present information by categories, such as: enrollment, curriculum, faculty, majors/programs offered, campus life, student body, costs, financial aid, admissions, selectivity, and profile of the first-year class. Handbooks are available in English-language bookstores and from online booksellers. The following is a list of a few suggested handbooks which might help you in your search:

Barron's Profiles of American Colleges. Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series. Published annually

CIS Higher Education Directory (visit www.cois.org)

America's Best Colleges. Washington, DC: US News and World Report, Published annually. Available at U.S. newsstands as well as at English-language bookstores, and online at <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges?ref=home>

College Board Annual Publications: College Board Publications
The College Handbook
The College Handbook, Foreign Student Supplement.
Index of Majors and Graduate Degrees
College Costs and Financial Aid Handbook

Peterson's Competitive Colleges
Peterson's Guide to Four-Year Colleges: Peterson's Guides.

GENERAL GUIDES OF EXPLANATION AND ADVICE

The Fiske Guide to College - Edward B. Fiske

The Insider's Guide to the Colleges - Staff of the *Yale Daily News*

The Fiske Guide to Getting Into the Right College - Edward B. Fiske

Colleges that Change Lives - Loren Pope (visit www.ctcl.com)

Looking Beyond the Ivy League - Loren Pope

The College Finder - Steven Antonoff

Rock Hard Applications- How to Write a Killer College Application - Katherine Cohen

The International Student's Guide to Going to College in America - Sidonia Dalby, Sally Rubestone, Emily Harrison Weir

Parents' Guide to the College Admission Process - National Association of College Admission Counselors. NACAC Publications, 1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 430, Alexandria, VA 22314

Beyond the Bac – Higher Education in France & Abroad, AAWE Publications, www.aaweparis.org, October 2011.

Your College Application - Scott Gelband, Catherine Kubale and Eric Schorr. College Board Publications.

Writing Your College Application Essay - Sarah Myers McGinty. College Board Publications.

On Writing the College Application Essay - Harry Bauld

FINANCIAL AID INFORMATION

Getting into College and Paying for It - Reecy Aresty Visit: www.reecysbook.com

Scholarships for International Students. Edited by Daphne Philos. Alexandria, VA: Octameron Associates. Published annually

Best College Buys Money Guide New York: Time Warner. Published annually.

College Costs and Financial Aid Handbook. Published annually by the College Entrance Examination Board.

Paying Less for College. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides. Published annually.

Financial Aid for College, USA Today. By Pat Ordovcnsky. Peterson's Guides.

TEST PREPARATION

Much material is available online. Manuals and practice tests for SAT (Reasoning Test) and the SAT Subject Tests preparation are available from the College Board and from Peterson's (see above). A number of other good ones are published, including those by the Princeton Review, Arco: Prentice Hall Press, and Educators Publishing Service Inc., Cambridge, MA. Commercial test preparation courses are available in many countries and are also offered through some bilingual and international schools.

COLLEGE CATALOGUES

Although information on individual colleges is of course available online, catalogues and brochures from individual colleges and universities are easily obtainable by contacting a college or university directly at addresses and numbers given in the above guides

VIII. Internet Addresses

The number of addresses and websites on the Internet grows faster than anyone can keep track of them. There are sites established by non-profit and governmental agencies providing general

information on the application process and financial aid. There are private sites for help in choosing and applying to schools, including help in filling out applications and writing essays, exam preparation, and even arranging on-site school visits, as well as searches for financial aid. Finally, most American colleges and universities have their own websites or at least e-mail addresses where one can get information, see pictures or videos of the campus, "talk" with various staff or students, and in most cases, fill out an application.

The simplest way to get connected to the domains of U.S. colleges and universities is to Google the item you are looking for. Here are some of the addresses which will help you get started:

1. www.finaid.org for financial aid information
2. College Board online (www.collegeboard.org) This is the site of the College Board, the organization which administers the SAT exams, and which provides several services including help in writing essays, and in finding schools and financial aid.
3. www.ACT.org
4. College Prowler (www.collegeprowler.com)
5. College Confidential (www.collegeconfidential.com)
6. Unigo (www.unigo.com)
7. <http://www.meritaid.com> (information on merit scholarships)
8. Council of International Schools. (<http://portal.cois.org/wcm/CIS/Directories/Universities/CIS/Directory/Universities.aspx>)
9. US Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/index.html?src=mr>)
This has limited value for non-U.S. citizens, but the information is accurate and objective.

GOOD LUCK from the AAWE College USA Committee!

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