

A Very Short Introduction to US and UK University Admissions

How international families
can approach the process
with confidence



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How to use this guide

If you're aiming to go abroad to university in the US or UK, I'm excited for you. Many, many students who make the leap have transformative life experiences, develop intellectually in new ways, go on to great careers all over the world, and find lifelong friends. And though the application process is arduous, it also empowers students to explore their interests and describe them in their applications--and not only to focus on high-stakes exams.

Why International Students Aspire to Top International Universities



During high school

- Less pressure on end-of-high school exams (except for UK); better for all-rounders
- More balanced life: academics + activities



In the classroom

- Greater focus on critical and independent thinking
- World-class professors
- Superior lab and other resources



Outside the classroom

- More diverse student body
- Wider array of activities
- Horizon-broadening life experience



Career

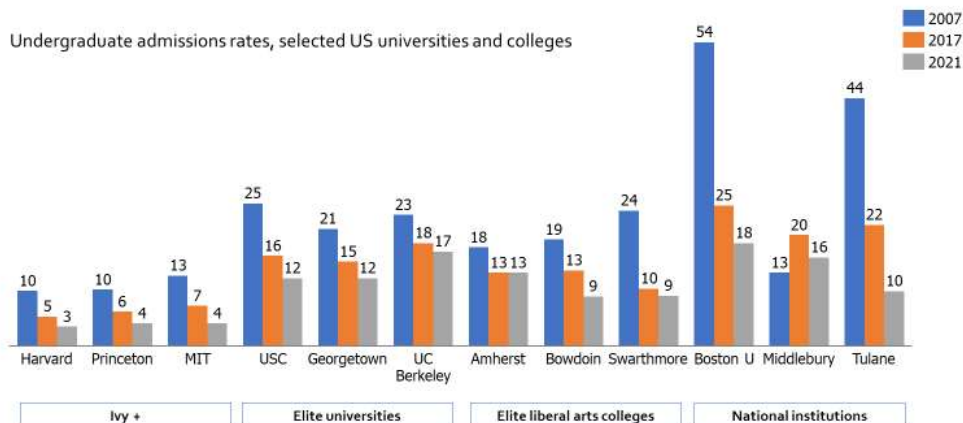
- Credential from a globally recognized institution
- Network of people who will go on to multinational careers
- Opportunity to work abroad after graduation

But if you're feeling uncertain about how to navigate the process, you're not alone. Many international families see today's admission rates and feel like it's mission impossible. Harvard, ranked #1 by the Times Higher Education / Wall Street Journal, had a 10% admissions rate in 2007. By last year, Tulane University, ranked #68 among US colleges by the THE-WSJ, had a 10% admissions rate (down from 44% in 2007), while Harvard's rate had dropped to a miniscule 3%. In the UK, the story is similar if a bit less stark: Oxford now makes offers of admission to only 7% of international applicants.

Admission rates to top US colleges



Undergraduate admissions rates, selected US universities and colleges



Source: [IvyWise](https://www.ivywise.com/)

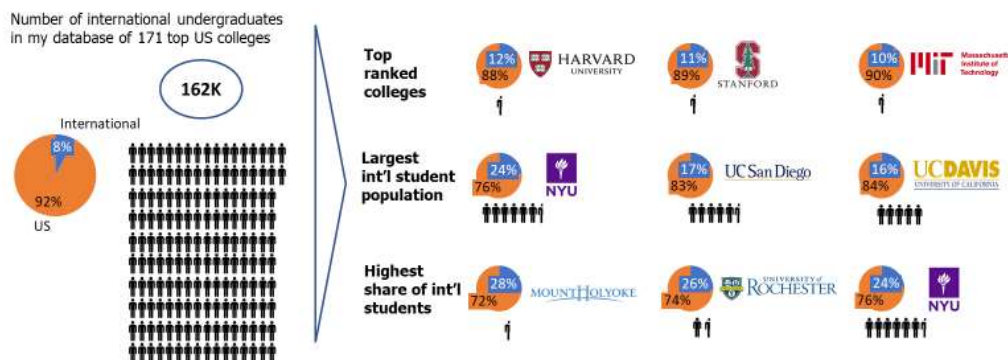
At top universities generally, applications from international students and students from underrepresented backgrounds are growing at double digit annual rates. Especially in the US, more students are preparing themselves for college applications like athletes training for the pros. Without question, many applicants find that it's hard to get into their dream school.

As head of International Strategy at Oxford University and now as an advisor to international students and families, I know how tricky it can be for international students to navigate the complex process of applying to top US and UK universities. Few will win the ultra-competitive lottery of getting into Harvard, Stanford, or MIT—and many of those who do have a non-academic advantage such as a family connection or athletic recruitment. But strong students who approach the process with an inquiring mind, diligence, and a bit of good advice can be confident of getting into at least one great school—and you only need one.

International student presence at top US colleges



There are ~162,000 international undergraduates, 8% of the total, in my database of 171 top US colleges. Leading universities typically are 9-13% international. 16 universities have 3,000 or more international students, and 16 are more than 15% international.



Source: Common Data Set submissions. Note: each figure represents 1,000 international students

This primer includes a bird's eye view of the main elements such as choosing where to apply; extracurricular activities, admissions tests, and essays; and a detailed timeline.

It also provides strategies, learned from years on the inside of higher education at top US and UK universities and from working with more than a hundred international students, to increase your chances of getting into a great college:

- five keys to top university admissions
- guidance on what universities are looking for and how to assess your chances
- whether it's worth taking the SAT/ACT (now that it's optional), and how to find colleges that won't penalize you if you don't submit a score
- what's distinctive about a good US college essay
- ways to make US college more affordable

The five keys to top university admissions

Before we get to the details, it's important to understand what universities are looking for when they review student applications. Students who gain admission to top universities do most or all of five things: take challenging classes in secondary school and do well in them; cultivate intellectual curiosity; set themselves apart through steady, deep engagement in a couple of activities; prepare well for standardized tests such as the SAT/ACT and subject-specific UK admissions tests; and pursue an academic subject in which they can stand out – not necessarily one that is oversubscribed.

Take challenging classes and do well in them

This always was and remains the foundation of the admissions process. You're applying to an institution of higher education, so your willingness to take on challenging academic courses and your ability to succeed in them matter most—especially in the year before you apply, because they may be the most recent grades universities see. If you're applying to the US and don't submit an SAT/ACT score to a particular college (or can't, because the college won't consider SAT/ACT scores), courses and grades are even more important. A few specific tips:

- Top US and UK universities place the most weight on Maths and English, so prioritize rigor in these subjects.
- If your earlier grades weren't great, US colleges will notice an upward trajectory.
- Take the normal number of subjects for strong students at your school; no need to overload yourself with an extra class.
- If applying to the UK, make sure you meet the subject requirements of the university courses you're applying to. For example, Maths is compulsory for many STEM courses

Cultivate curiosity

Perhaps the most underappreciated factor in university applicants is intellectual curiosity—an abiding desire to understand topics you're interested in. UK universities want to see that explored your chosen subject area outside what classes have required of you. US colleges prize curiosity and experience respectfully discussing controversial topics. One of Stanford's essay prompts is not unusual: "Reflect on an idea or experience that makes you genuinely excited about learning." Intellectual exploration also helps you figure out what you're interested in. Keep track of ideas or discussions you've encountered. You can cultivate and show it by:

- Reading widely: I suggest reading at least one non-school book a month
- Watching documentaries or high-quality videos such as TED talks; listening to podcasts; or reading good journalism such as the New York Times or The Economist
- Take an online course in a subject you haven't been able to take in school
- Chat with your teachers, debate with your friends and family.

Set yourself apart in a couple of activities

You don't need to be an "all rounder". Find 2-3 activities that matter to you, do them consistently over 2+ years, and with enough dedication to achieve something.

- One or more of the activities should make a significant contribution to your school or community, and show independence and leadership (paid work counts!)
- One of the activities should tie into your intended field of study, e.g., debate club for pre-law students. Subject/work-related experience is most important for the UK
- Many students admitted to top US universities have achieved something through their extracurriculars that really sets them apart, such as starting a new school club, leading a new initiative at school or work, or winning a major academic honour.
- Colleges will be more impressed by a quirky pursuit that you do unusually well than by run-of-the-mill participation in a common activity. Follow your interest, not the herd.

Plan to take standardised tests

The SAT and ACT are now optional (rather than required) at most US colleges, but submitting a good score still matters greatly at most highly selective colleges. This is especially true for international students, whose curriculum and schools are less familiar to US colleges.

- US-bound students without strong SAT/ACT score should consider the few dozen selective colleges that have genuinely de-emphasized the tests (i.e. are "test-blind" or were "test-optional" before the pandemic)
- Most of top UK university courses require subject-specific admissions tests, such as the Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA), and place great weight on them
- Strong Advanced Placement (AP) exam results can also be a differentiator.

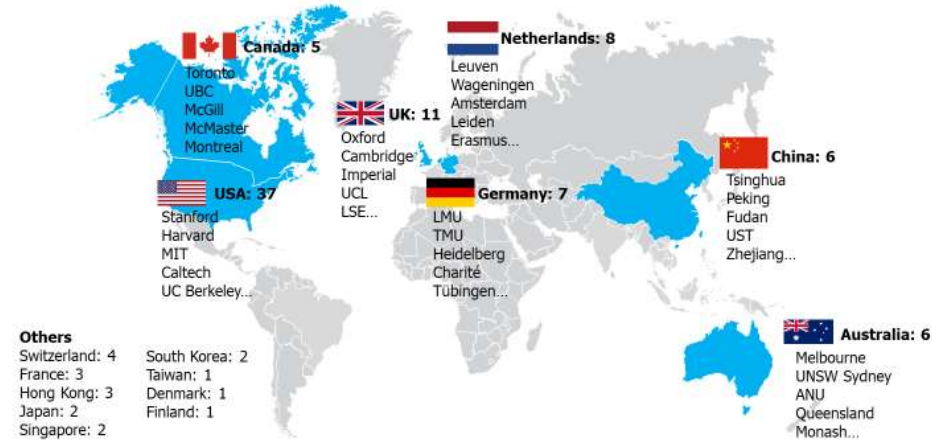
Pursue an academic subject in which you can stand out

Applicants to UK universities must specify the particular course (subject) they're applying for, while applicants to the US generally indicate which one or two subjects they're most interested in (but do not commit to a major). International students tend to crowd into a few pre-professional subjects, especially computer science, economics and engineering. Chances of winning a place to study in these fields are lower because they are oversubscribed. If you're as or more interested in a humanities subject or another social or natural science, apply to study it instead! You'll probably have a better chance of admission—and with a degree from a top university, you'll have outstanding career opportunities regardless of what you studied. You can always add technical or pre-professional skills through graduate school, extracurricular pursuits or work experience, or online credentials. At the same time, if your strongest intellectual interests are in one of the most popular/oversubscribed subjects, and you've distinguished yourself in it in secondary school, by all means apply for it; just be aware that you may need to broaden the set of universities to which you apply.

Choosing a country

The global top 100 universities

Source: Times Higher Education



The US and UK have more globally prominent universities than anywhere else, and attract many of the most ambitious students.

UK universities¹ provide a deep education in a particular subject typically in 3 years, and they select students based on their promise in that subject. Most prominent UK universities are midsize-to-large research institutions with a comprehensive subject offering², including humanities, social sciences, science & technology, and business.

Almost all elite US colleges, by contrast, provide a broad “liberal arts” education (meaning students study a range of subjects) and select applicants based on their ability to contribute broadly to the campus community. Prominent US colleges include mega-universities of 50,000+ students and so-called liberal arts colleges of ~2,000 students; comprehensive universities and specialists in science & technology, business, the arts, etc.

Two excellent alternatives to the US/UK are Canada, whose universities resemble those in the UK, and the Netherlands, offering a handful of “university colleges” modelled on US liberal arts colleges and teaching in English.

Admissions and education at top universities in the US and UK

	US	UK
Educational model	Start broad, declare a major later (though signal interest in application). 4 yr degrees. Lots of extracurricular activities and organized student life	Focused: apply to and study a single field (can choose joint courses and some broader options). 3 and 4 year degrees. Lots of independent study.
Student life	College-focused. On-campus housing for 80%+ at smaller/private colleges. School spirit / sports often central to social life, sometimes fraternities	More individualistic. Generally 20-50% in on-campus housing. “No Dean of Student Hand-Holding” though help is available for those who seek it out. Going out to pubs often central to social life. Lots of student societies.
Student diversity	<5% to 25% intl undergrads at top universities; increasing but limited socioeconomic diversity	15% to 50% intl undergrads at top universities; increasing but limited socioeconomic diversity
Types of universities	Research universities (public and private), liberal arts colleges, technical/ business institutes	All strong universities are medium-large, comprehensive, and research-intensive. Some ancient, some modern.
Useful rankings lists	Times Higher Education / Wall Street Journal College Rankings	Times Higher Education (THE); Guardian Best UK Universities
Admissions format	Common Application for most universities. Relatively demanding, including multiple essays. Sports recruitment offers a separate track.	UCAS for all universities. Maximum 5 selections. Moderately demanding, with one personal statement. A few top courses require admissions tests and/or interviews
Admissions criteria	Holistic: courses/grades + SAT/ACT scores (if provided) + extracurriculars + essays. Character matters.	Focused: courses/grades (+ personal statements)
Cost (tuition only)	\$45,000-65,000/yr; many offer need-based aid and/or merit scholarships	Intl: £20,000-35,000/yr UK: £9,250 (loans)

¹Scottish universities, which include Edinburgh and St. Andrews, offer a broader curriculum and 4-year instead of typically 3-year degrees.

² Prominent exceptions include Imperial College, which is best known for science & technology, and the London School of Economics, which is best known for social sciences.

Starting your university search

Many students think of finding a university like a talent show, in which the universities judge you and the rewards go to the students with the most or best offers of admission. Instead, think of finding a university as a matching process, in which you and the university are each looking for a good fit. Studies show that *how* a student engages with the university experience matters more to their success than *what university* they attend. So figure out what kind of environment you'll flourish in, and identify institutions that offer it.

This process of self-reflection should hone in on the most important qualities to you. One of my students sought a US college with strong English and film studies programs, and close contact with professors. Another wanted a UK university, ideally in a big city, with a great law program that includes an international component. A third is looking for a US college with a strong rowing program, a terrific business school, and good individualized student support

The best way to start your college search is by searching inside yourself. Ask yourself, your parents, anyone who knows you well, what they think an a great university experience would be like for you. Then revise your priorities as you learn more.

How to start focusing your college search



Start with what matters to you, not which colleges you think will accept you. What do you want from your college experience?

What kind of academic environment do you want?

- Many options and niches, and star professors? –or– Small classes and close relationships with your professors?
- Intellectual and intense –or– Laid-back and pre-professional?
- Strength in a particular field?

What do you need to thrive outside the classroom?

- Geography: big city versus small town, region/climate
- Social life: party school or quiet and studious?
- Feeling of campus safety
- Particular clubs / sports / activities

Don't worry if your initial reaction to these questions is "I don't know!" Think about different situations you've been in, and which have suited you best.

Ways to learn more about universities

Take charge of learning about and shaping your application list. You'll realize more about yourself and what you care about as you go.

- **College guidebooks**, especially as a first screen of universities on your longlist
- **University websites**, especially for course and curriculum information
- **Other online resources** such as student panels and vlogs, to get a feel for the campus culture and types of students who enroll, and rankings and student review websites
- **In-person visits**. Ideally undertaken in the spring/summer of year 11, in-person visits are a great way to get a feel for the university's environs and to ask questions. UK universities offer specific "Open Days", typically in summer and autumn.
- **Virtual visits and admissions events**. Colleges now offer a variety of online events including virtual tours hosted live by students and live information and Q&A sessions. Register for these and make notes from them that you can refer back to when applying to colleges.

Assessing your chances

It's important to draw up your application list with a realistic view of your chances of admission, so you can aim high but ensure that you have a couple of safe options.



US universities

US colleges assess students holistically, which means they place weight on a range of factors: most importantly classroom and standardized test performance but also extracurricular activities, essays, SAT/ACT scores, and other factors. Students who are competitive for admission at the most selective universities are usually in the top 5-10% of students in their school academically and have one exceptional extracurricular achievement or 2-3 "major achievements" (see "Extracurricular activities" section for more).

Most colleges now give students the option not to submit an SAT/ACT score, but it can still be an important consideration. (See "Admissions tests" for more.) Other meaningful factors include recommendation letters, and, for some colleges, your level of "demonstrated interest" and how you do in an interview. Students from countries that send few students to the college have a modest advantage.

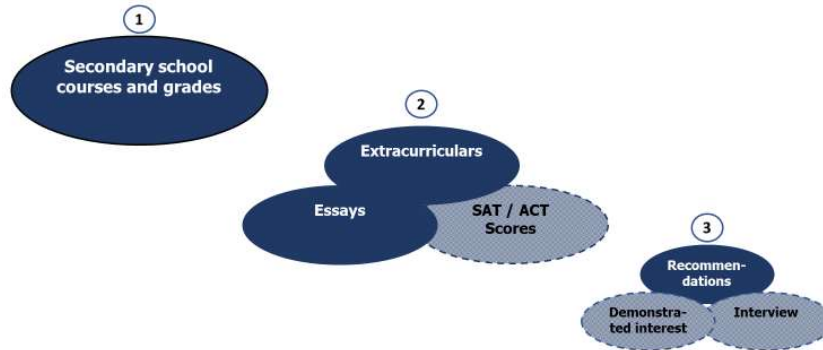
Make sure to choose universities that match up well with your strengths. For example, if your class grades are better than your SAT/ACT test score, choose some colleges that de-emphasize the SAT/ACT. If you are a strong writer or have a compelling background story to tell, choose universities that require supplemental essays.



US universities: importance of the various application factors



Courses and grades are the most important factor. Extracurriculars, essays, and SAT/ACT scores are also given serious weight by most colleges.



What colleges can you aim at?



Successful applicants typically have most of these elements

	Tier 1: "Ivy +"	Tier 1A: Elite universities and liberal arts colleges	Tier 2: Selective national institutions	Tier 2A: Less selective national institutions	Tier 3: Regional/ not selective
Grades	Top 2-5% of your school; IB 40+; 4+ AP scores of 5	Top 5-10%; IB 38+; 3+ AP scores of 4-5	Top 10-25%; IB 36+; 2+ AP scores of 4-5	Top 33-50%; IB 33+	Passing
SAT/ACT	99 th percentile (SAT: 1500+, ACT 33+)	95 th percentile + (SAT 1420+, ACT 31+)	85 th percentile + (SAT 1320+, ACT 29+)	70 th percentile + (SAT 1200+, ACT 25+)	Not required
Activities	1 Tier I or 2 Tier II and 2+ Tier III/IV	1-2 Tier II and 2+ Tier III/IV	1 Tier II and/or 2+ Tier III/IV	2+ in Tier III/IV	Not required
Essays	Reflects impressive character or depth of thought, nuanced theme, written with flair	Reflects impressive character or depth of thought, nuanced theme, clearly written	Consistent with activities / major, on topic, coherent, no major mistakes	On topic, no major mistakes	Generally not required or very important

UK universities

The equation is a bit simpler when applying to UK universities: academic performance, as measured by secondary school courses and grades (including “predicted” grades on end-of-year exams), is far and away the most important element. Thus UK universities can be a better bet for academically-accomplished students without eye-popping extracurricular achievements. The academic bar varies not only by university, but by course, and is often high. IB students who receive an offer from the very most selective UK universities typically are predicted to achieve 40+ points, placing them in the top 15% among all IB Diploma candidates. Many courses also require students to have studied one or more particular subjects in secondary school, and students need to make sure they apply to courses they’re qualified for.

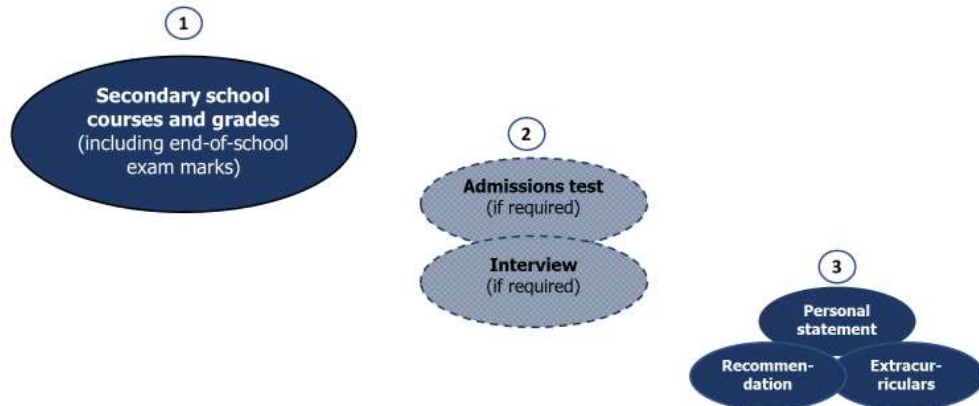
UK universities generally give modest weight to the personal statement, any extracurricular activities listed in it, and the teacher recommendation. Some pre-professional courses want to see relevant work experience.

For many of the more selective universities/courses, applicants will be required to take an admissions test related to the subject they will study, such as Oxford’s Maths Admission Test (MAT). Where used, these tests are given great weight. At Oxford, Cambridge and some courses at a few other universities, the most competitive applicants are then invited for academic interviews, with the top candidates receiving “conditional offers” setting out how well they must perform on end-of-year exams in order to have their offer confirmed.

UK universities: importance of the various application factors



Courses and grades are by far the most important factor. Extracurriculars, essays, and SAT/ACT scores are also given serious weight by most colleges.



Deciding where to apply

You're aiming to draw up a list of universities to apply to that has a good mix of reaches, targets, and probables. In the US, this is usually 6-12 colleges. In the UK, you're limited to 5.

Draw up a balanced list of colleges to apply to (US example)



Reaches	Targets	Probables
Comparing your record to enrolled students... receiving an offer would be a wonderful surprise	Comparing your record to enrolled students... you're competitive	Comparing your record to enrolled students... admission seems likely
Examples from one of my students...	Examples from one of my students...	Examples from one of my students...

Find less selective universities that you love

Unless you've discovered a cure for cancer and started a major social justice movement in high school, it's important from the beginning to look for colleges that you can pretty much count on being admitted to and that you would be excited about attending. Too many students choose their "probables" (also called "safeties") at the last minute, and then don't end up with any options they're excited about.

If you have an open mind and put in the time, you'll be able to find great choices that you're likely to get into. Some colleges admit more than half of their applicants and offer fantastic education and career prospects. These include Santa Clara, which ranks among the top 10 US universities for graduate salary¹, and University College London (UCL), which ranks among the world's 20 best universities². You should also look for less-selective universities that have a great program in the area you're interested in. The University of Pittsburgh, for example, is generally ranked among the world's five best philosophy departments—and admits 65% of its applicants.

Don't just apply to all the "top" universities

If you actually get to know the most elite universities—those few dozen that people around the world have heard of—you will find that they have differing characters. Find the ones that have the kind of environment that suits you. For example:

- If you're focused on preparing yourself for a career, you may be keen on a "pre-professional" education at Cornell and may be left cold by the University of Chicago, filled with intellectuals who like to discuss philosophy late into the night.

¹ [Payscale.com](https://www.payscale.com)

² [Times Higher Education World University Rankings](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings)

- If you'd rather not be expected to speak in class, you may prefer the relative anonymity of a large university such as UC Berkeley and might struggle in Oxford's intense tutorials, which pair a professor with just a few students.
- If you want lots of freedom to choose your own classes, Brown may be your utopia (there are no required classes) while Columbia's highly prescriptive core curriculum may feel like a straitjacket.

If your list looks the same as your friends, or the same at the end of your search as at the beginning, it's probably worth making sure that you've thought carefully about what you're looking for.

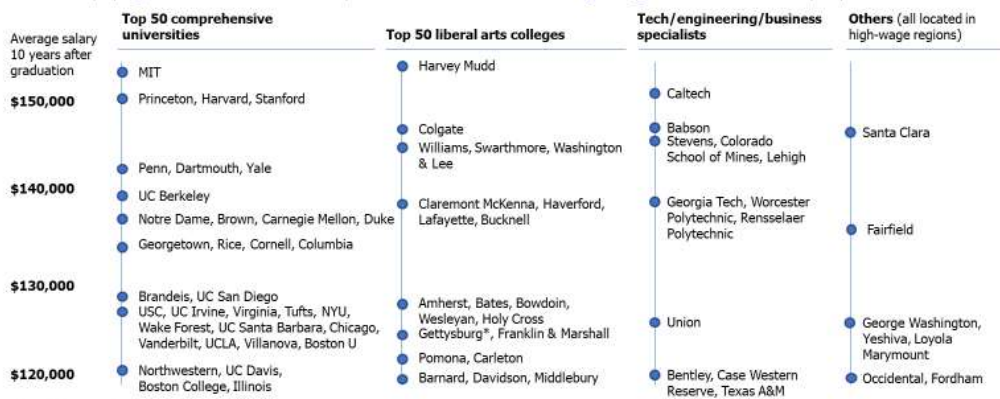
Consider smaller more undergraduate-focused institutions

Many of my students tell me their best learning experiences have been in small classes, and that they want close contact with their professors at university. This is harder at larger institutions. But I find that many parents want their child to apply to a college they've heard of, and most of these are midsize or larger. So I urge my US-focused students, including those interested in STEM subjects, to consider liberal arts colleges. These undergraduate-focused colleges with less than 2500 students boast smaller classes taught by professors rather than graduate students. Resources are often comparable to the wealthiest larger universities: liberal arts colleges take up 5 of the top 10 places in endowment per student. Liberal arts college graduates are also especially likely to go on to PhD work. And career outcomes can be excellent (see below).

US colleges whose graduates enter lucrative careers



Below is a list of the 75 US colleges whose alumni on average earn the most 10 years after graduation. It's a diverse array, including not only the most prominent universities but also top liberal arts colleges, many institutions specializing in well-paying STEM and business fields, and some others located in high-wage metros in California, NY, and DC



* Ranked just outside top 50
Note: Top 70 US institutions in average midcareer salary (10 years after graduation), according to Payscale.com. Excludes military academies

Students interested in the UK who want close contact with their professors should consider Oxford and Cambridge, which teach in small tutorials, or undergraduate-focused universities such as the London School of Economics and St. Andrews.

Tuition costs (and how to lower them)



US universities

US universities are expensive, with tuition at top private institutions typically above \$60,000 per year. (In-state students at publicly-funded universities pay much less.) Figure on another \$20,000 for living and other costs.

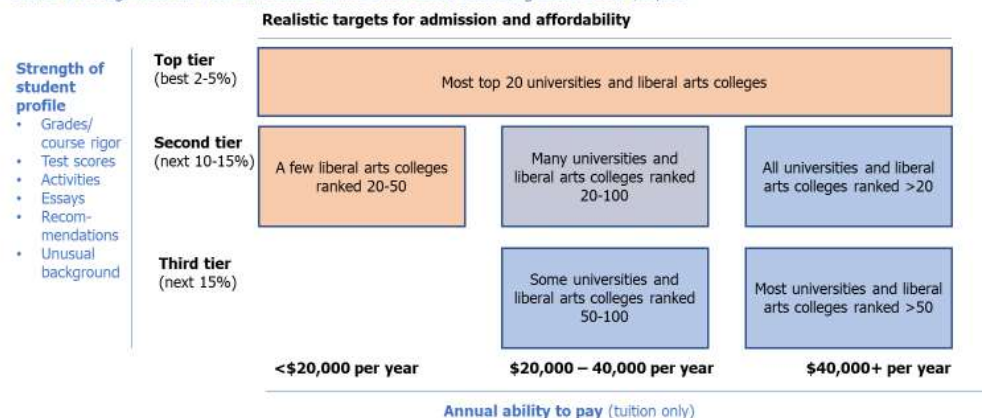
Some students pay less than this amount, sometime much less. There are four ways international students can make a Bachelor's degree at a US university more affordable:

- 1) Gain admission to a college that will **meet your financial need**, if your family does not have a high income. These ~25 super-selective colleges provide "need-based" scholarships generous enough to make it affordable for any admitted international student. Colleges set their own thresholds for need-based financial aid, but in general families earning above \$200,000 per year will not be eligible for much aid.
- 2) Gain admission to a college that awards substantial "**merit-based**" scholarships. Many of my students have been awarded these scholarships by good private universities, and they can range from \$5,000 to \$40,000 per year. These awards do not depend on the applicant's finances, but are awarded to some admitted students as an incentive to enroll.
- 3) Gain admission to a college with **lower tuition**. For international students, 13 of the top 175 or so colleges charge tuition of less than \$30,000 in tuition per year, and another 29 charge less than \$40,000. This is still a lot of money, but much less than the amount charged by many selective colleges.
- 4) Find an **external scholarship**, or take out an international student **loan**.

Stronger applicants have more lower-cost options



Top tier international applicants can shoot for admission at most top 20 schools without worrying too much about affordability. The next tier can target paying \$20,000-\$40,000 at schools ranked below about 20 (or less at a few schools generous with aid). The third tier has a chance at enough merit aid from universities ranked below about 50 to bring tuition below \$40,000



UK universities

International student tuition at a top UK university is typically £25,000-45,000 (\$30,000-55,000) per year for a three or four-year degree. Most universities have only a few scholarships available, so scholarship students at UK universities are typically supported by their home government or an external scholarship scheme.

Admissions tests



US universities

Almost all colleges dropped their SAT/ACT requirement when the pandemic arrived, and most remain “test-optional”, meaning they’ll factor in an SAT or ACT score if a student submits it as a part of her application, but do not require it. Colleges claim that an applicant is not disadvantaged if they don’t submit a score, but the evidence is that students who submit a good score are more likely to gain admission to highly selective colleges, especially if they’re international. This is because SAT and ACT scores have been a central factor in college admission for decades, and remain a valued data point in considering international students whose educational background is less familiar. Students who don’t submit a score can gain admission but have to be that much better in other areas to compensate.

So my advice is that so if you’re applying to the US, **take an SAT or ACT exam** in the winter or spring of grade 11. I know it’s a big ask on top of everything else, but to do your best, plan on preparing for these exams for 50 to 100 hours with Khan Academy or with a course or tutoring service, and take at least two full-length practice exams. You can re-take it if you like; I advise students to do so if they reckon they can score 50+ points higher.

If you don’t want to take the exam, or don’t end up achieving a good score, your best bet is to apply to at least some colleges that have decided to de-emphasize the SAT/ACT in their admissions process. These fall into two categories: those that went “test optional” before Covid, and those that have gone “test blind”—meaning they won’t even consider test scores in admissions. Across US universities, about half of applicants now admitted do not submit an SAT/ACT score.

Top 150 colleges that have de-emphasized the SAT/ACT



About 1 in 4 have made a credible commitment to de-emphasizing standardized tests in admissions



Source: Times Higher Education / Wall Street Journal US College Ranking; Fairtest.org



UK universities

If you’re applying to the UK, you may be asked to sit one or more subject-specific admissions test. Research whether an admissions test is likely to be required, when you’d need to take it, and how best to prepare. For example, the Law Admissions test (LNAT) must be taken before Oct 15 if you’re applying to Cambridge or Oxford. Most other admissions tests are administered (to some or all applicants) after the application is submitted.

Extracurricular activities

Many kinds of extracurricular activity can be part of your application



	Examples	Value
Academic / preprofessional competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robotics club Model UN Debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-trod path with opportunities for academic/ leadership distinction
Athletics / music / drama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Piano / violin Sports teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeps you happy/healthy; not decisive in admissions unless you're recruited
Community service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutoring underprivileged children Raising money for cancer prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows commitment to a cause beyond yourself, but avoid "token" experiences
Personal interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychology discussion group at school Baking elaborate cakes for fun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Powerful if undertaken on your own initiative or if you create something bigger than yourself Can provide good material for essays
Student government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class President, Social chair, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great opportunity to develop leadership; most valuable if you can show impact
Academic programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summer courses at universities Online courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows subject interest (esp. for UK universities) Exposes you to a university in your intended destination country More helpful if selective
Professional/research experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internship in an office or lab Guided research project outside school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows subject interest (esp. for UK universities) Can provide good material for essays



US universities

[Colleges]...are looking for young people who have committed themselves to one or a few things in which they have achieved some level of success—whether that's graphic novels, high school musicals, mathematics, soccer, a part-time job, American history, research at a local hospital, or playing the oboe.

Robin Mamlet, former dean of admission at Stanford, Swarthmore and Sarah Lawrence

Value of extracurriculars in the admissions process



Colleges are most interested in activities you have dedicated serious time to and significant leadership, academic or other honors. It's valuable to engage in a range of activities but overall depth is preferable to breadth.

	Exceptional achievements	Major achievements	Meaningful activities	Minor participation
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting a successful and sizeable organization (school club, charity, business) Placing highly in a national award competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head of a respected club or of your school class Significant academic award or research project Selection for a prestigious summer program School sports team captain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100+ hours working or volunteering Member of a successful academic or sports team Member of a selective regional orchestra or the lead role in a play DoE Silver or Gold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Club or sports team member Short-term employment or volunteering



UK universities

If you're applying to the UK, extracurriculars matter if related to your intended course of study. Universities are most interested in two kinds of extracurricular activities

- intellectual exploration around the subject you're applying to study, such as academic clubs or online courses
- work experience in the field, especially for pre-professional courses such as law or medicine.

Essays

I always find lots to admire in my students. But their writing often needs work. I worry that they haven't been set high writing standards by their teachers or been regularly given detailed expert feedback. We also know that reading good writing is crucial to doing good writing, and that most of us are reading less (scrolling through Instagram doesn't count!)

Writing well matters in admissions and professionally. Learning how to do it is often one of the most important and time-consuming endeavors my students and I undertake together.



US universities

US college application essays come in many varieties, but most are reflective—asking you to share experiences that reveal something important and personal to you. The Common Application accepted by most colleges includes a 650-word essay, and many colleges also ask for supplemental essays, which range in length from a few words to 500 words or more.

In reading your essays colleges want:

- To see that you can write clearly, effectively, and engagingly
- To learn something important about what matters to you / how you think / what makes you distinctive--not to read about accomplishments you've included elsewhere
- To develop a picture of how you'll contribute something special to the college

Easier said than done, right? There's no formula, but here are a few principles I emphasize to my students:

- Organize the essay around a theme that shows how you can contribute to the university community, inside or outside the classroom. For example:
 - Contributions inside the classroom: curiosity, creativity, interdisciplinary thinking, a deep academic interest
 - Contributions outside the classroom: service, teamwork, leadership, multiculturalism, persistence
- Tell a story, or a series of anecdotes, from your personal experience to illustrate your theme and bring it to life.
- Be as specific as possible. Most student essays are at their best when they stick close to personal experience. What did you see/hear? What were your thoughts/feelings? What did you say, and what did others say?
- Sweat the details: use proper grammar; be precise in your word choice; be punchy with your sentences

Start by reading lots of good essay examples.



UK universities

All UK universities require a single 4000-character personal statement, which is a kind of intellectual autobiography, showing **why you're interested in the subject you are applying for** and how you developed skills relevant to succeeding in the course. It should cover:

- Why are you interested in the subject you want to study?
- What have you studied in school that relates to the degree?
- How have you pursued your interest in this subject outside school?
- What outside interests have helped prepare you to succeed at university?

Timeline

If you're just getting started in thinking about where to apply in the middle of year 11 (the school year before your last), you have enough time to thoughtfully select universities and prepare yourself to put your best foot forward in applications.

The critical tasks in **year 11** to set yourself up for a successful application process are to

- 1) Decide what country you want to apply to
- 2) Take the SAT/ACT if you're applying to the US; or make sure you get relevant work or other experience in your intended field of study if you're applying to the UK
- 3) Continue or deepen your commitment to an activity that you're passionate about and that could be a core element of your application narrative

If you're in year 9 or 10, your main priority should be your school courses and extracurricular activities, but read ahead to find out what's ahead of you in year 11/12.

University admissions timeline – 2nd half of year 11 and summer following



	Jan - Feb	Mar - May	Jun - Aug
Self-assessment and development	--Think about the characteristics you want to project on applications --Get started on summer plans --Continue/deepen key extracurriculars, and drop others	--Finalize summer plans --Decide on the specific UK courses you want to apply for at each university --Read successful US college essays	--Brainstorm and draft main Common Application essay --Read UK personal statements
Application prep	--Understand what universities and the application process are like in each country you're considering --Create your application "longlist" (US: ~20; UK: ~10) and begin to attend virtual information sessions	--Finalize what country(ies) you'll apply to --Meet with your counselor to discuss your university plans --Visit universities in person (if feasible) --Approach two teachers who could write you a recommendation	--Settle on your application shortlist (US: ~ 12; UK: 5) --Draft main US Common Application essay --Confirm recommenders --Gather application requirements (e.g., supplemental essays) and deadlines
Testing	--Sign up for at least one US SAT/ACT test --Decide whether to take US AP exams --Confirm courses for year 12	--Take US SAT/ACT/Eng lang/AP tests	--Prepare for any remaining US standardized tests or re-takes --If relevant, study for UK admissions tests

University admissions timeline – year 12



	Sept-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan - Aug
University list & outreach	--Re-confirm your short list (factoring in SAT/ACT results) and identify any early application(s) --Meet with guidance counselor and re-confirm recommender(s) --Continue to join virtual information sessions --Complete any early applications	--Finalize summer plans --Decide on the specific UK courses you want to apply for at each university	--Brainstorm and draft main Common Application essay --Read UK personal statements
Application/enrollment procedures	--Create a US Common Application / UK UCAS account and familiarize yourself --Gather application requirements (e.g., supplemental essays) and deadlines --Draft/refine US main and supplemental essays --Draft/refine UK personal statement --Register for UK admission test if applicable	--Complete UK UCAS application (if not already done) --Do application interviews (if offered) --Draft / refine UK personal statement	--Do application interviews (if offered) --Update colleges with any new grades / other news
Deadlines	Oct 15 th : Oxford/Cambridge and UK Medicine applications Nov 1 st : US early app deadline (Nov 15 th for some)	Early Nov: many End Nov/early Dec: some US regular decision applications (e.g., UC campuses) Jan 1 st – 15 th : most US applications Jan 15 th : UK applications	Mar/Apr: Regular decisions communicated (early application decisions communicated in Dec/Jan) By May 1 st : confirm US choice

About Loren Griffith



Loren had a terrific college admissions advisor--and it made all the difference. He became an advisor himself to bring great universities within reach for more international students.



Professional background

- **Director of International Strategy at Oxford University** in the UK for seven years (2010-2017), where he helped to set the university's international student outreach strategy, and ran admissions sessions around the world
- Holds degrees from three top US universities: an undergraduate degree from **Yale**, a Master's degree from **Princeton**, and a law degree from **Stanford**
- Previously a consultant with **McKinsey & Co.**, the pre-eminent global strategy consulting firm, working out of the Delhi, London, New York, Boston and Los Angeles offices
- Has led almost 20 strategy projects for universities, school systems, and education companies
- Has **taught** undergraduates at both Stanford and Princeton, and secondary school classes in the UK

Personal journey

Loren attended an ordinary public high school in California and was aiming to attend university in California. The Ivy League seemed out of reach, if he thought of it at all. But when he was 16, he heard Dr. Marty Nemko giving college advice on the radio, and signed up to work with him. Marty helped Loren to see how high he could aim, and then to reach those aims. Loren got into college counselling to provide the same kind of invaluable support.

Get in touch if you'd like to discuss individual support

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Loren has advised students who have applied and been admitted to top US, UK and Canadian universities including:

