

- HOW - TO IMPRESS U.S. UNIVERSITIES

A Guide for International Students



AARON BASKO

HOW TO IMPRESS U.S. UNIVERSITIES

By
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ILLUSTRATIONS

by

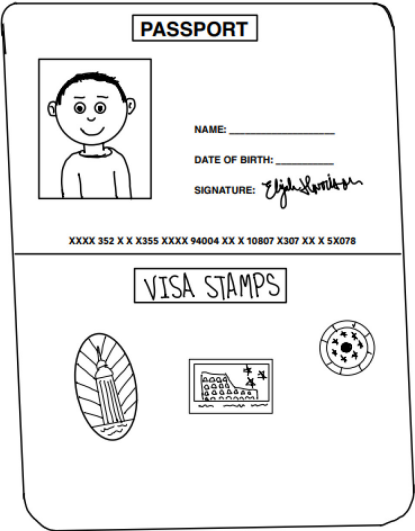
A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Elijah Harrison". The signature is written in a dark, fluid ink, with the first letter of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Elijah Harrison

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INTRODUCTION





"Amid challenges, seeds of resilience grow into towers of achievement. For students dreaming of U.S. education, each hurdle is a testament to your strength, and each success is a triumph against all odds. From hardship to a future, shining in gold."

Su Nge Aung (Ms)

Education Advisor

EducationUSA Burma

This is a book about dreams. We all have them -visions of what we want our life to look like. Many times our families have dreams for us as well. Sometimes they are shared and sometimes they are different than our own. Your dreams probably contain ideas of what you would like to do for work and where you can get the education to reach that goal.

If traveling to the United States in order to study is a part of that vision, then this book is for you. It is meant to help you understand the U.S. educational system at the college or university level. It is here to help you navigate the system and to understand what those universities are looking for when they review candidates. It is also here to help you take full advantage of the experience that you could gain from studying in the U.S.

A U.S. education is valued the world over, partly because it is different than other types of university education. It is based on certain principles and traditions that serve students well and that encourage a particular type of thinking and approach to the world.

Multiple Paths

A U.S. education can open doors of opportunity. For many students, it allows them to get the kind of preparation and credentials that they will need to return to their home country and make a difference. Having completed a degree in the United States will help them stand out from any other candidates with whom they may have to compete. It will demonstrate a high level of rigor, independent thinking, and problem-solving ability that allows individuals to lead others responsibly.

For other students, a U.S. University education will lead to a path of working in the United States. This often starts with an experience in Optional Practical Training (OPT) that is approved on many student visas. Students who are successful with this opportunity are sometimes given the chance to remain in the country as an employee of the company or another company with whom they are able to connect. For some students, that starts the process of them becoming a long-term resident in the country.

Still other students will leverage their experience to become true global citizens. They will take their degree, and instead of returning to their home country, they may go to live and work anywhere around the globe. In doing this, they are able to bring the diverse perspective from their education to their work experience.

The English Benefit

Depending on where students are coming from, learning or mastering the English language may be part of their journey. Even students who have studied for many years in their home country will often find that speaking in the United States is quite different. Not only is colloquial English different than academic English, but American English is different from British or Australian English, and there are regional accents that can be a challenge to a nonnative speaker. That said, there is no better way to learn the language than to live it.

Even with a relatively limited level of English, students can benefit from the total immersion that comes from studying at a U.S. College or university, rapidly improving their speaking, listening, and reading abilities. For many students, depending on their country of origin, this facility in English alone provides them with a major benefit in the job market. It opens the door to multinational companies, government agencies, travel-oriented jobs, translation, teaching, and much more.

The Social Benefit

What many students do not think about in their calculations of whether or not to study in the United States are the social and cultural elements that can be beneficial. It is very common for students who are attending a U.S. College or university to meet new friends that they will stay in touch with for their whole lives. For example, my mother is 76 years old. She made a friend while she was in college over 50 years ago from the country of Cyprus. This

summer she will travel there to visit her friend after years of keeping in touch.

The same thing happened to me. I made friends with a Japanese student while I was in college the 1990's. Twenty years later I visited him in Japan. Recently, I spoke with an international student on our campus who had made friends with an American student. She accompanied the student to her home for the Thanksgiving holiday. The American family now treats the student, who is from Bangladesh, as another member of the family. The parents call to check in with this student just like they do their own daughter.

There are many stories of this type. Despite the stereotypes, many Americans are very friendly and very curious about other cultures. While they typically do not excel in learning foreign languages, this does not mean that they're not interested in people from other places. In fact, international students often find that Americans are very open and transparent in their communication. They tend to say what they're thinking and what they mean, rather than guarding information. This makes it easy to form friendships.

American families, in particular, have a history of reaching out to students from other places and inviting them for meals or to celebrate holidays. It doesn't always happen all at once. The United States tends to be a transactional culture, so there is much less emphasis on family ties. At first, it may seem like American students are not willing to take the time to get to know you, but if you are persistent, and especially if you join in with them in the activities that they enjoy, you will find that you quickly become part of their inner circle.

It is not uncommon at my university for international students to return 10 or 20 years later to visit people who they met while

they were on campus. Sometimes they send their sons and daughters to study with us as well.

|| **The Cultural Benefit**

In general, the American culture has a strong sense of taking care of one's neighbors. Sometimes students are surprised to find that Americans are friendlier to people they don't know or have recently met than they seem to be to their own relations. International students often benefit from this welcome.

The United States also tends to be a very casual culture. Students are surprised to find that people call each other by their first names. Even younger people often use the first names of people much older than they are. There is very little social stratification. While there is respect for people in authority, it is also acceptable to question in most situations.

Many decisions are made through consensus or discussion that in other countries would be made in a top down fashion. This can be confusing and sometimes even frustrating for international students, because it can make the decision-making process slower. Still, this is a difference that international students can learn something from, as they see the unique combination of logic and persuasion that drives much of American interaction.

|| **The Geopolitical Benefit**

Students will also often be surprised to learn the way that Americans view themselves in the world. In many countries, Americans are seen as overbearing. This is particularly true in politics, where the United States is often viewed as aggressively

getting involved in other regions. This sometimes creates resentment. Often when students come to United States to study, they receive a totally different view of the way Americans look at the world.

I like to tell students that if they have seen western movies with cowboys in them, they have seen a bit of the American heart. While many other places in the world view of America as meddling and overreaching, most Americans think of themselves as defenders of the weak. Just like a cowboy, who rides into a western town and sees villains mistreating the local inhabitants, America often views itself as coming to the rescue of those who need its strength.

What other countries often see as intimidation, Americans tend to see as role of the older brother looking out for younger siblings. Keeping this framework in mind can sometimes help in understanding why Americans behave the way that they do.

Immerse Yourself

If you come to United States to study, I highly encourage you to get out of just the university context, and especially to get out of the group of other students from your home country. You learn so much if you are able to connect with average Americans in the places that they live and work. If you seem open to it, they will invite you to their homes, their churches, their civic events, and their entertainment. They may not always know your cultural norms, but they will do everything they can to help you enjoy an American experience.

If you are considering studying in the United States, I would highly encourage you to do so. It will be a life-changing experience

if you allowed to be. Yes, achieving a U.S. degree is a powerful thing, and it will open doors to your future career. At the same time, your experience can be so much more than just a degree if you are open to what you find when you arrive.

Do not try to recreate your culture here, but bring the best of your culture and share it with people here who are curious. Ask lots of questions, learn all you can, and invest in the relationships that you find. These opportunities will pay you back many times over, and be even more valuable than the degree that you earn.

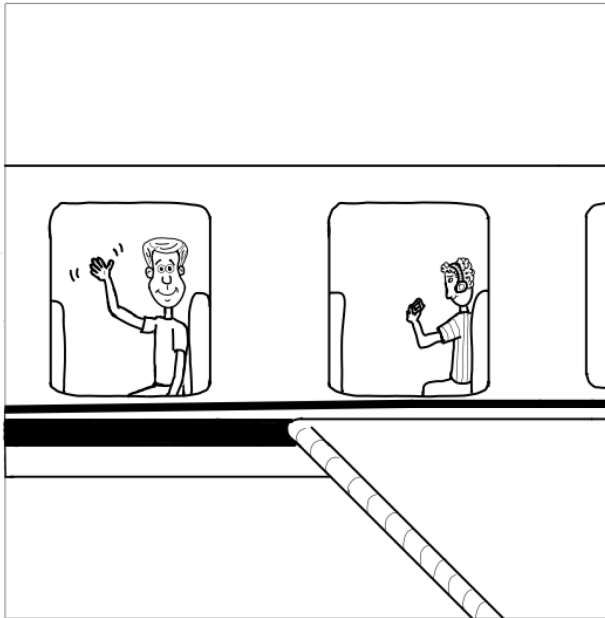
In this book, I will do everything I can to help you achieve your dream.

Takeaways:

- ◆ The goal of this book is to help you navigate the U.S. university application process and show you how to get the most value from a U.S. educational experience
- ◆ A U.S. university education can lead you to multiple paths for your future
- ◆ This experience offers many benefits, including:
 - ◆ Improving your English if it is not your native language
 - ◆ Rich opportunities for social connections
 - ◆ A chance to experience culture and learn from it
 - ◆ A better understanding of the role and identity of the U.S. in the world
- ◆ To get the maximum benefit, it is essential not to attempt to recreate your home culture, but to fully immerse yourself in your host culture

Chapter 1

MY EXPERIENCE





Advice from the Expert

International students have been a milestone in shaping the US educational landscape. As complex as their situation is in their home countries; inflation, high exchange rate and lack of opportunities to make their profiles outstanding on their applications, students from North Africa prove to be successful and to have high rates of enrollment compared to years before. According to the Open Doors report of 2023, Tunisia as a case study witnessed an increase of 680 Tunisians studying in the US, compared to 534 in 2020. 61.8 of them attend doctoral universities (Data, 2023).

As a member of the Community-based organizations, my recommendation for students is to set objectives and targets since early stages of high school years to engage in cultural and extracurricular activities to build a strong personality and a growing interest in international education. To do this well, they should seize the chance to participate in exchange programs, not only to enhance their chances of admissions, but also to prepare themselves for a new cultural phase, which is becoming an international student.

This new title comes with new responsibilities such as enduring homesickness, working on-campus to be financially comfortable, and enhancing their experiential learning to apply the skills they learned to their job. International students are an asset to overseas universities. They will be bearers

My Experience

and ambassadors of their culture. It is not an added number to the student population, it is a new flag on campus, a new activity in the office of Global Engagement, more activities in the International Education Week and more fun in the classroom. However, to implement this, students need to reach out to experts in the field, build connections with admissions officers and visit schools; in-person or virtually to find out their passions early-on.

Today's student is tomorrow's leader

Ilhem Daadaa

EducationUSA Advisor

Amideast Tunisia

Let me start by telling you a little about my background in higher education and in international education in particular.

When I graduated from high school in the United States, I applied to become an exchange student with Rotary International. I spent a year in between high school and college studying in Argentina. I attended school, I lived with two host families, and I completed an internship in a bank. I learned a second language, and I made the very most of my experience in a place that started out as very foreign to me.

When I returned to the United States, I attended college on a full scholarship to study international relations. I completed my degree and began my study at the graduate level in Latin American history. I finished my master's degree, which was covered by a Foreign Language and Area Studies scholarship (FLAS). After some brief work with a technology company, I was hired for a position at a small college in the admissions office.

Over my approximately 25 years in the enrollment area of U.S. higher education, I have had some amazing opportunities. I have

written more than a dozen articles for the most prestigious magazine in the field of U.S. higher education. I have provided consulting services for nearly one dozen other colleges and universities. In 2015, I was selected as a Fulbright higher education administrator grant recipient to Japan. I then served on a panel to select Fulbright winners for three years following. In 2016, I was invited by the Fulbright commission of Iceland to speak at the U.S. Embassy there about ways to build capacity and student mobility for institutions around the world.

While I have worked in all areas of enrollment management, my favorite has always been working with international students. I have recruited students internationally in China, Japan, India, and Argentina. At the last three institutions where I have served, I've increased international enrollment by an average of 300%. I have met and mentored many international students, and I still communicate with many who I have known over the years. They have enriched my life in countless ways, teaching me their language, instructing me in their customs, and sharing with me their friendships.

It is from this over 25 years of experience with both college admissions and international education that I share with you my advice on how to get the attention of U.S. colleges and universities. I will talk about how to stand out in the applicant pool, how to manage your application and your communication with admissions offices, and how to think about the financial investment that you will make in a U.S. education. Finally, I will share with you how to make a smooth transition to the American university setting, and how to get the most out of your experience.

My Experience

Allow me to start by sharing something fun. Most U.S. colleges and universities host what are called open house programs for domestic students. These are days when students and their families can come to visit the campus, learn about the programs, and pose their questions of staff and faculty. You may not have the opportunity to experience this before you arrive on campus, so let me share with you something that I usually tell the groups that I speak to when they attend our programs.

I will usually share my favorite analogy of the college search process. It goes something like this:

“Have you all seen those great adventure movies, where someone is trying to jump from the hood of a moving car onto a moving train?”

Nods from the audience.

“That is my favorite way to think about finding a university.”

Confused looks.

“Stay with me for a minute. Students, imagine that you are the person on the car trying to make a good jump. All of the work you have been doing for the last few years in school – your great grades, your extracurriculars, the things you have learned – they are the momentum that is propelling the car forward.”

Some nods.

“As you are there, you see trains going by. They go at different speeds and to different destinations. You want to pick one that will get you where you want to go. You don’t want to jump for a train that takes you forever to get there, but you also don’t want to make a leap for one moving way too fast either.

Parents, I also have a role for you in my analogy. See what you think. I imagine you as the person inside the car helping to hold the wheel steady so that your student can make a jump.”

Noises of agreement.

“Now, hopefully, you are not out on the hood trying to jump with them. I know some of you are.”

Nervous laughter.

“But I also hope you are not just rolling down the window and giving them a push!”

More laughter.

“You are here today because you are searching for the right train. The one that will get you to your desired destination, on time and intact. That’s not always an easy thing to find.”

This guide is written to help you find the right train. That involves preparation, research, and matchmaking. None of that is easy, as you have never been in this situation before. Let me put my more than 25 years of experience to work for you to help you stand out in the process in a way that gets you noticed, while at the same time, helping you to find a good fit.

To make this book even more valuable, I have reached out to colleagues from across the world to ask them to share their wisdom with you. I have asked them to share tips and strategies that will help you to be the best candidate and the most successful student possible. In the advice sections, you will hear from admissions officers at highly selective universities, student mobility experts for various regions from EducationUSA, international student support professionals, current and former international students, and more.

My Experience

I can tell you from my experience that certain attitudes and activities will help you not just to get to your goal but to get so much more out of your experience along the way. Recommendations like:

- ◆ Approach your experience with a “learner’s mind,” being open to learn from everything and everyone you encounter.
- ◆ Truly immerse yourself in the culture. While you will want to keep some of your cultural traditions, do not try to convert your new location into what you know. Really be present in the culture and get the most out of it.
- ◆ Do not overlook people who may seem less important. Sometimes it is the people without prestige or important titles that will make the most difference in your experience.
- ◆ Expect to have some communication challenges. It is only natural that you will have misunderstandings.
- ◆ Try not to judge people right away. If someone does something that offends you, ask for more information. In most cases that is not the intention.

Having these types of attitudes toward your experience will also go a long way in positioning you as a great candidate for universities. They are looking for students who are open to new experiences, who want to both learn and teach, and who want to recognize and affirm the best in others. Every university would like to think that by accepting students like you, it is training the next generation of leaders in countries around the world. If you show you have this kind of leadership potential, it will make you a very attractive applicant.

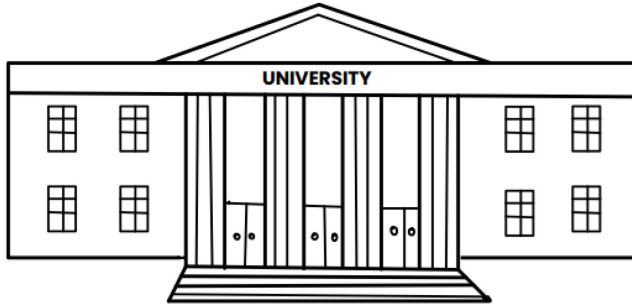
Takeaways:

With expert information from knowledgeable professionals from around the world, this guide will help you:

- ◆ Get noticed by U.S. universities
- ◆ Manage your application process
- ◆ Make a smoother transition to U.S. university life
- ◆ Take full advantage of the opportunities offered from your experience

Chapter 2

TO MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION,
UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM





Advice from the Expert

“International students who choose to study in the United States embark on a process that involves choosing from almost 4,000 accredited institutions. That is a daunting task, so breaking it down is key. Here are my top three tips for how to choose a major and institution easier.

- 1. Don't think about a major as a direct correlation to a career – at least for most areas. Take a step back and think about what you want to be doing in life. Do you want to do more hands-on related tasks? Do you want to work with people face-to-face? Do you want to be working with computers? A liberal arts education provides a broad range of topics to learn about. It allows you to explore courses you may not have otherwise pursued. Transferable skills are ever more important as many jobs of the future don't yet exist. So, visualize a day in your future life and see how your higher education experience can best prepare you for that.*
- 2. When you identify an area of study, dig deeper to look at courses. How is the subject covered? Are you looking for more theoretical, practical, hands-on? What aspect of that field do most of the classes cover? How institutions offer a particular major can greatly differ from one to the other. So, read course descriptions and check out student features to*

To Make a Great Impression, Understand the System

better understand what studying that field can look like. Don't worry if you don't know what you'd like to study yet; that is where exploration and trying new things are critical. The same advice applies: dig deeper and see what institutions offer variety in areas you want to explore.

- 3. As an international student, you are making a significant commitment and taking a huge leap of faith by traveling far from home from all that is familiar. For many, it may be the first time traveling by plane, sharing a room with a stranger, cooking your own food, managing your time, living in a different climate, and so much more. So, do your homework! What kind of experience are you looking for? Recognize what part of that experience is a must-have, but also challenge yourself a bit. There are many degree types, sizes of institutions, fields of study, combinations of degrees, student organizations, internship opportunities, etc. The more you define what is important to you, the easier it will be to find your fit. No question is too big or too small when it comes to your overall experience. Make your list, revise as needed, and cross-check those must-haves with your shortlisted institutions.*

There is no shortage of amazing educational opportunities in the United States, but it is up to you to enhance your learning with all the other elements of the experience. Reach out for ideas, ask questions, do your part in really defining your priorities, find your fit(s), and enjoy every part of the journey!"

Melissa Deschamps

EducationUSA REAC: Regional Manager

Middle East and North Africa

The first strategy that will help you to impress colleges is to understand the college and university system in the United States. Many students coming from other countries have a very cloudy understanding of the way that universities in the U.S. work. They

often know only a few names of highly ranked institutions, and don't understand that there are different types of colleges and universities that do different things. These universities cannot be accurately compared to each other.

Often, in communicating with colleges and universities, students betray the fact that they really do not understand the American system of higher education. This sometimes makes the institutions nervous, because they have concerns that students will not adapt well, or do not understand the values and priorities of their community. Having a base knowledge of the U.S. educational system will help you talk knowledgeably to admissions offices.

|| Institutional Types

There are several major categories of institutions to be aware of. There are private research universities with a national and international reach, there are large, state-run public universities that also have a national and international audience. Typically, each state has one of these primary public universities, but some have more.

In addition, there are many private colleges and universities that would be considered regional. This means that they tend to draw students from smaller geographic area. Typically, they also have a stronger focus on teaching and less focus on research. They often do not have as much name recognition as the large private institutions, but they offer students some very positive benefits, including smaller class sizes and classes taught by full faculty instead of graduate students.

In addition, all states have regional public institutions, sometimes called comprehensive universities. Many of these began as teachers' colleges, but over time they grew to become more complex and added many more majors. These institutions also focus more on the undergraduate teaching experience, but there is some access to research.

In a different category are community colleges and trade schools. Many of these offer two-year associate degrees instead of four-year bachelor degrees. Some students complete only these two years, while others from community colleges will transfer up to a four-year institution. Many four-year institutions have special agreements with community college partners to make that transfer easier.

The largest private and public research universities often have very low acceptance rates, some only in the single digits. This is primarily because they are so well known. People from all over the world have heard of these universities and believe that attending them will maximize their network of contacts when they graduate. This can certainly be true, but obviously there is a limited supply of spaces and far too much demand. In many cases, the students that are admitted to these universities and those who are rejected are very difficult to distinguish from each other.

The good news about the U.S. higher education system is that there are roughly 4000 colleges and universities across the nation. Many, many of these colleges and universities are high quality, they are just not as well known. Some of these actually offer students some advantages over their more famous relatives. For example, research conducted by the writer Malcolm Gladwell (*David and Goliath*) suggests that the students who find the most success in life

after graduation are not necessarily those who attended the most highly selective institutions. Instead, what he found was that the students who are most successful are the students who were in the top one third of their institution, no matter where that was.

His research indicates that students who were at the top of their class, rather than in the middle or the bottom at a highly selective institution, actually received better opportunities for mentoring, research, and other special attention that allowed them to develop strong leadership. In the U.S. we sometimes use the phrase “being a big fish in a small pond.” The big fish in the small pond gets his choice of the best resources. Similarly, top students who attend less selective institutions often receive the very best of everything that the university has to offer, including more personal attention.

|| **The Liberal Arts**

One of the biggest misunderstandings that many international students have when they come to the U.S. to receive a degree is the American emphasis on a liberal arts education. Even though only some colleges are considered in the liberal arts category, the whole foundation of U.S. higher education at the bachelors level is structured around the basic concepts of the liberal arts. This can be frustrating for students coming from highly specialized fields.

A student coming to study computer science may not understand why he or she is being asked take a course in English, philosophy, psychology, or history. To this student, these classes may seem like a waste of time. But the American higher education system has resisted the pull of hyper specialization. Instead, it is based in the concept that students should not only be excellent

technicians, they should also be well-rounded people who are able to think independently and act creatively.

In its simplest form, I like to think about the liberal arts as a philosophy of leadership development. The liberal arts sit on a base of education that was developed in England, and its roots go deep into classical western thought. When colleges were founded in the United States in its early days, many of them were started outside of the major cities in smaller growing areas. These areas had a desperate need for citizens who could become leaders in their geographic region. It was too far for them to travel to major cities for education, so smaller liberal arts colleges were founded to fill this need.

These colleges were designed to train the kinds of leaders that these smaller communities were desperate to find. This included lawyers, doctors, and clergymen in particular. Students who attended these institutions were groomed, not to do a job, but be able to cross lines between jobs and lead people. The basis of the liberal arts to this day is grounded in the ability of students to think broadly and learn from their history so that they can influence people, lead people, manage people, direct people, and understand people. A good way to think about this, is that the liberal arts does not focus on training students for a first job, but for a long-term career that will guide them to levels of leadership and management within organizations.

Colleges and universities approach this tradition in different ways. The most common form that you may encounter it is a core curriculum or distribution requirement that all students are required to take at the institution regardless of their major. This can be very confusing for international students. Many of them are used to

studying only courses within their specialty. They arrive in the United States and suddenly they are taking classes from lots of different areas of study. But this is part of the philosophy of U.S. higher education. The goal is to give students the broader view of the world, and to help them understand better how people think and interact with each other.

It is a very different philosophy than many students are used to, but the results speak for themselves. So, do not be surprised if you arrive and find that only a few classes each semester are in your major, at least at the beginning. Make the best possible use of these classes. Enjoy them. It is a great way to meet students from other majors and to learn about different viewpoints.

Religion and higher education

Many international students are also confused by the historical connections of many colleges and universities to religious organizations. The truth is, that almost every private college and university, even places like Harvard and Yale, at one point began as religious institutions. The Christian church in America was the primary founder of much of higher education, and many institutions were started, in whole or in part, to train clergy members for churches.

For many colleges and universities, this religious tie is only in their distant history. Most have become completely, or mostly, secular institutions. If you see a religious connection in a university's history, for example on its seal or motto, this does not mean that you will encounter a religious environment. For many institutions this is only part of their history.

There are some colleges that maintain strong ties with their church denominations. This is not necessarily a negative, even if you are not from that religious tradition. These institutions often have very strong community environments. In fact, many students who come from conservative or traditional religious backgrounds, even if not a Christian, may feel more comfortable in these environments because they are more supportive of traditional values. If you have questions, be sure to ask individual institutions what their religious tradition means, and how they support students coming from different traditions.

Higher Education's Explosive Growth

Higher education in the United States began to change dramatically in the 1940s and 1950's after World War II. The demand for higher education rose dramatically in the United States at this time, partly because the government assisted soldiers coming back from the war to further their education. Many of the regional state institutions evolved from primarily teaching colleges to more complex universities. The largest state universities, often called flagships, begin their steady population growth. Universities became more selective, and people started comparing them to one another in a more systematic way. Research became a much stronger part of university life. This is really when the modern age of the university began in the United States.

Since that time, higher education in the U.S. has undergone several cycles of growth and decline. The advent of college rankings, and a rash of large gift endowments to selective institutions, changed the landscape into what we see now, which is a small group of highly selective institutions and a vast majority of

colleges and universities that are less selective and more focused on the teaching experience.

Reflecting Back the Institution's Values

As you explore the higher education landscape in the United States in order to find the right fit, knowing these categories of institutions can help you navigate. You may have friends or family members who insist that you only look at certain types of institutions. This is fine, but know that being accepted will be a true challenge, and may come with very low financial support.

If you are that caliber of a student and have the financial means, then certainly go ahead and pursue these institutions. If you are not a strong applicant for these universities, however, you should not be discouraged. There are many other institutions in the United States that also can give you a high-quality education, even if their names are not as well known. With a little bit of research, you can find a place that will be a good match for you and deliver a meaningful experience.

How Universities will Think About You

To make yourself an attractive candidate to universities, demonstrate that you know something about the higher education system in the United States. In your essay, interviews, or application mention that you understand the great diversity of institutions within the system. Talk about what you see as the advantages of the type of institution to which you are applying.

For example, if you applying to a very large state university, you may want to mention that you are excited about the cutting-edge

research the university is conducting or your interest in attending large athletic events. If you are applying to smaller institutions, you might want to talk about the value of the leadership development that you will receive from a liberal arts education, or that you think you will thrive in smaller classes, or that it is important to you to learn from professional faculty and not student teaching assistants.

You can also look back at the history of the college or university and talk about anything that catches your attention. You can discuss wanting to be part of an institution that is growing quickly, or has always valued the contributions of diverse perspectives, or maintains strong traditional values, or has been a pioneer in the sciences, or whatever is notable in the university's history. Institutions highly value that you see them as unique and special, just as students want to be viewed as unique and special.

I can tell you from first-hand experience that universities worry that students are just applying to lots of institutions without really knowing anything about them. They are concerned that students will arrive on campus expecting one experience and finding another which is very different. They are particularly concerned about the “retention” of students.

Retention is the word used to indicate the likelihood that students will stay at that institution without transferring or dropping out. Retention is very important to colleges and universities. They are actually graded on it in various ranking systems. One of the qualities that they most look for is students that are planning to stay at the institution for their whole program.

If this is your intention, one of the best things you can do as a candidate is to indicate this. When you have the opportunity, indicate that, “I believe that X college is the right place for me. I

am committed to staying for the whole programming and graduating with my degree from X. My family and I have reviewed my educational goals and our financial abilities and belief that X is the right place for me.”

Advice from the Expert

“You need to have specific reasons in choosing the right colleges for yourself. One of the factors that are of paramount importance, but is mostly neglected by students, is to read up the mission and values of each college. Understanding the core principles of a college can help determine if its academic programs align with your interests and goals, which can serve as a direction for your academic journey.

Since the culture and community of a college play a pivotal role in shaping your academic life, these values can enhance your sense of belonging, leading to meaningful connections within the campus community.

Please do not dismiss a college from your list of options simply because you assume that only those students with perfect grades and exceptional test scores will be admitted and receive scholarships. Each college will differ in its evaluation of its prospective students with many factors that come into play.

You should approach the college application process with an open mind, taking cognizance of your own unique qualities and achievements.

Here are a few examples that students have been engaged in that have helped build their unique personal brands, which have further provided them an excellent opportunity in getting accepted into colleges with substantial scholarships.

- ◆ *Participation in national and international math, science, and economics Olympiads that highlight their dedication to intellectual pursuits.*

To Make a Great Impression, Understand the System

- ◆ *Take the lead and participate in Model United Nations (MUN) conferences in one's college or city, which showcase exceptional leadership and organizational skills.*
- ◆ *Active involvement in debates which shows strong articulation and critical thinking skills.*
- ◆ *Research internship or volunteering with a non-governmental organization which demonstrates their interest in gaining meaningful professional experiences.*

Many times, admissions officers also consider the individual circumstances of each student's achievements with regards to any challenges they may have encountered and overcome.

Shanti Thapa

EducationUSA Adviser – Nepal

Frequently Asked Question

What is the difference between a college and a university?

The words college and university are often used interchangeably in the United States, which can be very confusing for international students. This is particularly the case when Americans are referring to all institutions of higher education or when they want to refer to both categories by saying just one word. Often that word is “colleges.”

There is a difference between the two, but the line is blurry. In general, colleges are smaller institutions with less complex structures. Universities tend to be larger and have more complexity. Often universities are made up of “colleges” or units of specialized study, for example a “college of business,” “college of sciences,”

“college of humanities,” etc. A number of institutions began as colleges, but changed their names to “university” as they grew. This even happened with some relatively small institutions when they added graduate programs or new levels and types of degree.

Universities are not superior to colleges, nor the reverse. The name is mostly a comment on the size of the enrollment, but you can find excellent quality or mediocre quality at either.

Takeaways:

- ◆ The United States offers a wide variety of institutional types, including private research universities, public flagship universities, national and regional liberal arts colleges, public comprehensive universities, community colleges and trade schools
- ◆ The “liberal arts” is built on a tradition of leadership development for students, and is one of the differentiating features of U.S. higher education. While sometimes puzzling to international students, a liberal arts-based education is a huge benefit of many U.S. degrees.
- ◆ Many U.S. institutions come from a religious heritage, but some retain active ties and others only historical ties. Many of these schools welcome and support students from all religions.
- ◆ U.S. universities saw explosive growth in the mid-20th Century, which led to the American university system that we know today

To Make a Great Impression, Understand the System

- ◆ To impress universities, students need to understand and to be able to reflect back the values of the universities that interest them.

Chapter 3

TO MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION, COMMUNICATE WELL





Advice from the Expert

"The process to apply to institutions in the U.S. is not complicated as long as you take time to follow all the necessary steps. It is very important to be ahead of time regarding deadlines and requirements. Every university has its own process and the students should be aware of the differences between each university so they can submit all of their documents on time"

Belen Robles

EducationUSA Advisor

Guyaquil, Ecuador

You have a dream for your future, and to accomplish that dream, you need help from people on the other side of the world who have never met you and do not know you. How can you connect with them to make your dream more likely to come true?

A big part of the strategy is communication.

The variety of higher education in the United States is pretty stunning. Colleges come in many different sizes and types. Some are very large, and applying there is more of a numbers game. At some, however, particularly small and medium sized institutions,

your interactions with university personnel in the process can make a difference. Why is that?

Most U.S. institutions pride themselves on looking beyond just the student's statistics to also consider your personal qualities and your ability to make a contribution. This gives you the opportunity to make your case in a more personal way. Understanding how and what to communicate can help you present yourself as a more valuable candidate.

Demonstrated Interest

Many colleges and universities apply the concept of “demonstrated interest,” either officially or unofficially. Demonstrated interest means that a student has done something to indicate to the university that there is a high likelihood that the student will enroll if admitted. Why is this important?

In the United States, colleges are considered more prestigious if they have many applicants but can only accept a small number. This is called the “admit rate.” The most prestigious colleges (like the Ivy League institutions) are considered so partly because the demand for them is high, so they have to turn away many students. That means that their admit rates or acceptance rates are extremely low, sometimes in the single digits. Because of this focus on selectivity, colleges do not want to “give away” their acceptances to students with a low likelihood of attending. This means that if you are seen as a student who is applying to many, many universities, with no loyalty to any, you are less likely to receive an admission offer. Universities want to be your favorite. They want to know that if you are admitted, you are likely to attend.

This is why so many universities utilize Early Decision programs. Early Decision is an application option that allows students to signal that this particular university is the student's first choice. Students sign a contract saying that if the university admits them, they promise to attend. This is highly valuable to universities. They want to be students' first choice, and they want to keep their admit rates low. If they admit you through early decision, they have a 100 percent chance you will attend. If they admit a student through Regular Decision, they may have a 33 percent or 25 percent chance that the student will attend, which means they have to admit three or four times more students to have the same number to enroll.

Early Decision is the most obvious way to show demonstrated interest. If you have a clear first choice institution and you know that you can afford to attend, applying Early Decision should significantly increase your odds of being admitted. It can be a very helpful tool.

Luckily, there are other ways to demonstrate your interest, however, if Early Decision is not an option for you. With domestic students, universities most often look at whether students have visited campus for a tour. This is because it is traditional for families to visit colleges to get to know them before selecting one place. Universities know from their data that the likelihood of a student enrolling is much higher if the student has visited campus – sometime five times higher or more. This is particularly true if students live relatively close to the university. Why would you not go to visit? Because of this dynamic, colleges prefer to see that students have been to campus, and will sometimes prioritize

admission for those students over others, although they typically take it into account if a student lives far away.

If you are an international student who has the opportunity to visit universities that interest you, do it. Go on their standard tour and attend their information sessions. You will get “credit” for doing so in the process. In fact, having international students visit is unusual for many universities, which means you will almost get “extra credit” for doing so. You want to be there and be visible. While you are there, meet as many people as you can and let them know of your interest.

For the majority of international students, however, visiting first is just not possible. That is okay. There are other ways to demonstrate your interest.

One of the first way to do this is to attempt to communicate with admissions staff at the institution of your interest. This can be a little tricky. Admissions officers receive LOTS of communication from students, so you do not want to be just another annoying email in their inboxes.

Many students start this process badly by reaching out with an email with lots of specific question or requests. This is not the right way to go. First of all, many of the answers to your questions may be on the website, and the admissions officer is likely to be aggravated by answering questions you could have found for yourself. Secondly, you are likely to ask a question innocently that shows you do not really understand what the university is looking for in students.

I typically counsel international students to use what I call a “heads up” email, based on a frequently used phrase in American English that signifies that you are giving someone advanced

warning. In this kind of email, you are letting the admissions office know that you are planning to apply, that you have done your homework researching the university, and that you want to be a successful applicant. This email might look something like this:

Dear Admissions Officer,

My name is Aaron Basko. I am a student from Barcelona, Spain. I am planning to apply to the University of Lynchburg, and I want to send this short message to introduce myself and to thank you in advance for reviewing my application.

I first heard about your university from a friend of mine who applied there. As I began researching the University, I noticed that it places strong value on assisting each student in achieving their maximum potential. I was impressed by the focus on giving back to the community and the commitment to small class sizes and the opportunity to practice what I learn. I am interested in studying Computer Science. From my research of your website, I have noted that the University seems to have a strong Computer Science program. It looks like the department has faculty interested in artificial intelligence and game design, which are areas of strong interest to me. I also saw that you have an excellent debate team. I have participated in debate for the last five years and even won some awards in my region for my participation. I would be excited to contribute to that team.

I will be sending my application in the next week, including my essay on using robotics to help kids become interested in science. Please do not hesitate to let me know if I can provide anything else that would be helpful for your review. I am very excited about attending the University of Lynchburg and hope in the future to have the opportunity to meet you in person.

With kind regards,

Aaron

Obviously, your message will be specific to you, but you can see how this message would make a positive impact. It has a tone of helpfulness. It shows the student's interest in the university and demonstrates that he has researched the university specifically, rather than it just being one more school on the list. It alerts the readers to look out for the student's application and even gives a little teaser on the essay topic. Most importantly, it does not demand action or seem pushy in any way. Instead it is confident, friendly, and enthusiastic. That is how you want to start a relationship with a university.

Email and Virtual Connections

For most admissions offices, the preferred communication method is email. You will also find this to be the typical official communication channel once you arrive on campus, so make sure you are checking it regularly.

Often, when you submit an application for admission, you will be asked to create an account, and updates to your application status will be reflected in this account. The university will expect that you are checking this account regularly. They will also expect that you are using its features to manage your application process. For example, typically the account will provide checklists showing which documents you may be missing and what are the next steps for you to take in the process (submit bank statements, submit an enrollment deposits, submit insurance information, register for housing, etc.).

The University has designed this pathway to help you know what to do next. Most admissions offices receive lots and lots of questions about things that students could take care of themselves if they followed along with these checklists.

Here I would like to give some specific advice to students who are working with recruitment agencies. All agencies have different policies and procedures. Some will want to complete the application and submit it for you. Colleges would prefer that you submit it yourself, but they will usually accept it from an agency if the agency follows the proper steps. Here is the challenge. Often, if the agency submits your application, they have the information on your account and receive any follow-up email communications.

This can cause issues if you never get experience in working within the University's portal or account system. I have seen many times, that students who work through agencies arrive on campus and have no idea how to do basic functions, like pay their bills, see their classes, access the learning management system, check their email, etc. This puts them significantly behind. They also sometimes arrive without a very good sense of the university. Make sure you stay involved and engaged in the communication, even if you are receiving help.

As you proceed through the process, you will have other opportunities to demonstrate your interest. You may be offered the opportunity to participate in an interview with a member of the staff or a local graduate. There is a later chapter specifically on interviewing, but in most cases, it is to your advantage to have an interview. The one exception would be if you know that your English is very weak and you will not be able to communicate well.

Otherwise, interviewing provides the human element that can help you make a better connection.

Many admissions offices also offer virtual information sessions for international students. It is always to your advantage to attend one of these and register ahead of time so that the university will know that you have participated. While in the session, if it is allowed, ask a question or two so that it is more likely you will be remembered. Keep your questions positive. Ask things that show the university in a good light. Be polite and grateful to the person for their time.

This is also a very natural time to send a follow up thank you. This very seldom happens. I don't know if students think it is too presumptuous, but for me, the few times I have received a follow-up email from a presentation have always been very welcome. Something like:

“Dear Mr. (Name),

I would like to say thank you for the time you took to present to the international student group last evening. It was a very informative session, and I appreciated the chance to hear more about the University. I came away from the session with even more interest in attending.

Thank you as well for the opportunity to ask questions. I was the student who asked about opportunities for research, as I am very excited about working with faculty in my area of study. Thanks for providing more information.

I look forward to hopefully attending the University, it seems like it could be a wonderful match for me.

Thank you,

Name”

How Not to Communicate

It is important to understand that admissions officers who work with international students face many specific challenges that tend to make them hesitate to communicate too much. First, they often receive a high volume of messages. Many of these messages ask the same questions over and over again. They have all had experiences with students who falsify their documents or misrepresent themselves. They have worked with students who are manipulative or even just rude. There is also a lot of room for cultural misunderstanding. Because of all of these elements, many admissions representatives are cautious in their communication.

It is important to keep this in mind when you interact with admissions office. First, always be polite. This is so basic I should not even have to say it, but it is that important. Second, do not demand, request. The U.S. is a more egalitarian society, which means that there is less difference than in some cultures between those with high-level authority and lower-level employees. All employees expect to be treated with a certain level of respect. It is also a culture that is skeptical of privilege. Unlike in many countries, being from a wealthy family or a high social group does not necessarily gain you respect or advantages. Respect is typically earned through your actions, so being too showy with wealth or social status can sometimes work against you.

On the other hand, it is important not to come across as desperate. While admissions officers are typically sympathetic people, there is a point at which dramatic stories begin to be a negative. I also strongly advise against make an early appeal for a large amount of funding. We receive many messages each year that start with, “I need a full scholarship to attend your university.”

Why is this a problem?

Full scholarships in the current environment are quite rare. There was a time a few decades ago when colleges and universities operated with a philosophy that if they provided large scholarships to a few of the brightest stars, it would draw many other good students. After a few decades of experimentation, they found that this was typically not true. Instead, they found that by spreading their scholarship dollars over more students, they were better able to impact the quality of their student bodies as a whole. Because of this, it is much more common now for institutions to give smaller amounts of scholarship to larger numbers of students.

At the same time, it is important to realize that while colleges and universities are considered non-profit organizations, they have bills to pay. Because of the high costs of the services they provide, most institutions need the money from tuition and fees to pay a large portion of their costs. If they were to provide many large scholarships, they would be effectively paying the students to attend. That is just not a reasonable thing to ask of most universities.

So, approaching with a request for full funding is likely to be received negatively by most institutions. I will not say never say it, that may be your only option, but that is certainly not the way to start a conversation.

Sometimes, I think it is helpful to remember that most colleges look at this as building a life-long relationship with students. They want you to attend, contribute, and give back. You would not likely start a relationship by saying, "Let's go to dinner together. You are paying." That might seem extreme, but it is how the request typically comes across.

The last point I will make is about frequency of communication. One mistake that international students often make is to be too urgent in their communication. Sometimes students will email an admissions office, then email back two hours later to see if the email was received, then email every day trying to get a response.

This is not likely to endear you to the staff. It is important to understand that admissions officers are likely working with hundreds or even thousands of applicants. Give them at least a few days to respond to a query. Do not email them saying, “Urgent! I have my visa appointment tomorrow and I need my I-20 today!” Most admissions offices work with highly developed processes. Some will be able to modify the process to accommodate you, but some will not, and pushing too hard may get you sidelined.

If you have established a contact with an admissions officer, following up every couple of weeks, or when there is an important next step is not usually a problem. But many times I have heard, “Ugh, that Aaron Basko emailed me again! He emails every day with a list of questions. I am going to start just ignoring him.” You do not want to be that student.

The Goal

Those are the keys to communication from an admission office point of view. When it is done right, good communication can make a real difference in your application being noticed and in you framing yourself as an interested student who would be a good match for the university.

You will make yourself an attractive candidate by demonstrating that you have excellent communication skills and emotional intelligence. If you are always polite and friendly, and you always keep in mind what your audience is experiencing, it will help you stand out in positive ways. You want to be responsive to questions and requests for information, while also understanding that admissions officers are very busy and cannot constantly be responding to queries.

In my experience, the biggest mistake you can make in the whole application process is to break someone's trust. You may have the opportunity to begin to build a relationship with the admissions officer, **MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT LOSE IT.**

This has happened to many students who were dishonest or tried to take advantage of that connection. In many cultures, bending the rules is accepted, especially for individual with wealth or status. In the United States, there is a very strong sense of justice and fairness, and this is typically connected to playing by the rules. If an admissions officer finds out that you have lied to them about something, falsified documents, told that person one thing and someone else something different, or in other ways misrepresented yourself to them, it is a breach of trust and could cost you your admissions.

I have also seen students make the mistake of assuming that if someone gave them additional consideration, they will not mind if the student asks again. This can also go very wrong. This is most common with money. A student makes a special plea or documents circumstances that might warrant additional financial consideration and an admissions officer presents this request in good faith. The

request is granted, but the student then proceeds to ask for even more, or arrives on campus and begins making appeals.

This creates a terrible loss of face for the university representative. If someone acts as your advocate to receive additional consideration, that means they have taken a risk and spent some of their prestige to help you. They will expect gratitude and for you to be happy. If instead what they receive an additional request or a sense of entitlement from the student, the student has probably lost that relationship for good, and it will likely impact the representative's willingness to advocate for others in the future. Do not ever make a representative feel like you are using them to get something that you want.

If you can avoid these mistakes, and focus instead on trying to create a positive, open relationship based on good communication, you will be able to show that you are the kind of applicant the institution wants. You will indicate that you are ready to be a mature and responsible community member who will bring something of value to the university.

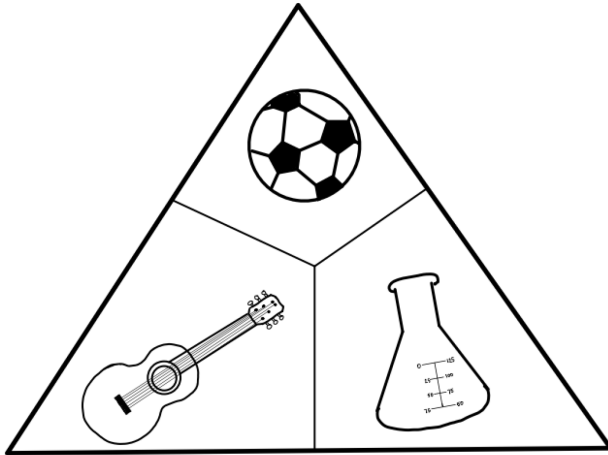
Takeaways:

- ◆ U.S. universities take into account the personal qualities of their applicants, and they highly value expressions of interest, such as visiting campus, attending virtual events, or applying for early decision, if it is offered.
- ◆ While the normal channel of communication with admissions officers is email, students are expected to follow the directions they are sent for navigating application portals before reaching out with those questions.

- ◆ Too frequent or too demanding communication, early requests for financial support, or misrepresentation of a student's information or situation will all be perceived as very negative by universities and will damage your chances of admission.

Chapter 4

TO MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION,
PREPARE A STRONG APPLICATION





Advice from the Expert

“As you approach the end of high school, choosing the right college might feel like a big puzzle. But don’t worry, we’re here to help you put the pieces together. Let’s break it down into simple steps:

Step 1: Know Yourself

Take some time to think about what makes you, well, you! Consider your interests, values, and dreams. A mood board can help you visualize this. Remember, colleges want to know the real you, not just your grades.

Step 2: Explore Colleges

Check out college websites and attend open days or virtual tours. Get a feel for the campus and imagine yourself there. Look into the programs they offer and see if they match your interests.

Step 3: Ask Questions

If you have any doubts or questions, don’t hesitate to reach out to the admissions office. They’re there to help you. You can also talk to your high school counselor for guidance.

Step 4: Get Organized

To Make a Great Impression, Prepare a Strong Application

Make a list of the colleges you're interested in and keep track of their application deadlines and requirements. Stay on top of things to avoid last-minute stress.

Step 5: Write Your Essays

When it comes to your college essays, be yourself. Share your stories, passions, and goals. Don't be afraid to let your personality shine through.

Step 6: Submit Your Applications

Once everything is ready, hit that submit button! Double-check everything to make sure you haven't missed anything.

Step 7: Wait (Patiently)

Now comes the hard part—waiting for those acceptance letters. Stay positive and keep yourself busy while you wait.

Step 8: Make Your Decision

Once you start receiving offers, take your time to weigh your options. Consider factors like location, cost, and program offerings before making your final decision.

Remember, applying to college is a journey, not a race. Take it one step at a time, and you'll find the right fit for you.

Good luck!"

Melike Ulusal

English Teacher and Overseas College Advisor

Alkev Schools, Turkey

The university application process often seems very mysterious to applicants, especially those coming from far away. It seems like

it is impossible to know what admissions offices are really looking for.

While each institution is different in its exact needs, all of them share certain goals. They all want to attract students who make them look good, and they all want to enroll students who will be strong member of their community and make a contribution.

Yes, the first thing almost all colleges will look at are your numbers. They want to see that you took a strong academic curriculum, and that you received good grades. Most will want to see some form of test score, English exam, or other objective measure of your academic ability. Having a strong record like this gets you passed the basic requirements for consideration, but it is the other elements of your application that make you stand out.

As strange as it sounds, colleges want to know students' stories. They want to know who you are, where you come from, why you are applying, how you will take advantage of the opportunity if it is offered to you, and what contribution you will add to the university community. In some ways, they are not looking for who appears to be the best student, but for who they think will be the best graduate. Which students will bring the university honor and increase its values and reputation, either while on campus or as a graduate of the institution.

Your goal in the process is to tell your story. It needs to be consistent and compelling. Universities will look to see if all of the pieces of your story match. Are you asking to study medicine but have weak science grades? Do you say you want computer science, but have never taken a computer science class? Do you say you care about the environment or issues of poverty but have never been involved in activities to support these causes?

Your record should be consistent about who you are. Your essay should paint a picture that matches with what they see on your transcript, what your recommendations say about you, and the way you communicate with the university. One of the biggest concerns that colleges have with international students is being sure they are talking to the right person. Will this student of promise that I see on paper arrive on campus and be that same great student?

Triangulating

This brings me to one of my favorite concepts and strategies for students in presenting themselves to colleges.

Years ago, colleges used to speak about wanting “well-rounded students” – students who could do a little bit of everything. This perspective has changed over time. Now colleges are more likely to seek a well-rounded *class*, or incoming group of students, but look for students with “angles” – special characteristics that stand out about them.

In presenting your application for admission, you need to understand the experience of your reviewers. Some reviewers will read dozens or even hundreds of applications per day. They have to find ways to summarize what they have read, either to make a decision or to pass this information along. To do this, they usually do what I call triangulating. Triangulating means selecting out a few characteristics that you can use to summarize students, therefore making them easier to remember.

For example, I might read a student’s application and decide, this is the Pakistani poet who is a local cricket champion and wants to study artificial intelligence. Or I might be reading an application

from the Honduran student, interested in marketing, who plays classic rock guitar, and whose godparents run an artisan chocolate factory (real example). You might be a South African rugby player who has done environmental research and volunteers at the local homeless shelter. Do you see how easy these are to remember? As a reader, I am looking for angles that make a student stand out from others and that I can fit into just one or two sentences. That makes it easy for me to either create a written summary or to share it with other people in my office.

Here is the inside secret that most students need to understand. Most admissions officers want to like you. Think about it. People take jobs in higher education because they like students and want to make a difference in students' lives. For the most part, they are not people who enjoy rejecting students. Sometimes they have to because of the strong demand their school may receive, but they are all secretly hoping to find that very intriguing "diamond-in-the-rough" student. They are sure that somewhere in the stack of applications they have to read, they will find the next Nobel Prize winner, the next international leader, the next Mother Teresa. They want to find you, but you have to help them do it.

Imagine the scene. You are inside an admissions office. There is a long hallway, and along both sides are offices of admissions officers reading application. Every once in a while, one of the pops out of their doorway and says down the hall, "I just read the most interesting student. Listen to this essay!" That is what you are hoping to have happen. Admissions officers want to discover great students, you can help them find you by triangulating for them.

So, if you had to pick 3-4 things you would want an admissions officer to use as your "angles" what would they be? What are the

things you would most want them to remember? Here is part of the trick, you do not have to have something that is world-renown. What really makes you stand out is actually the combination of these factors. They actually are drawn to students who have a few different facets, and sometimes these facets are very different than each other, or do not seem to go together.

You may be a student who has done something really noteworthy. Maybe you have won a national prize or done original research. If so, that is wonderful, you should include it in your application, as it will certainly make you stand out. But you do not have to have done something like this. Look at the three examples that I gave above. None of them received major recognition. What caught the reviewer's attention is that they brought really interesting *combinations* in their application. They offered a few areas of passion and commitment, but not necessarily ones that were related. This made them very intriguing applicants.

Whether you are putting together your application pieces or preparing for a university interview, you want to start by asking yourself, "What three things do I want my reader (or interviewer) to walk away knowing about me?"

If you know these things in advance, you can focus on highlighting them and brining them together in a way that shows what an interesting person you are.

Most often, I see students who have one academic passion, one sport or extracurricular activity, and one area of involvement that is away from school – perhaps something with the community or family. This is not the only possible combination, however, as some students are more focused on multiple academic specialties or multiple extracurriculars.

Obviously, your college essay is a good place to reinforce your messages, and we will look at that in a later chapter, but there are other ways to make sure you are taking advantage of triangulation:

1. Include your most important features high up in the “activities” section of the application. As much as you can, use this section of your application to highlight the things you want readers to remember. When listing activities, show that you have a depth of commitment to the things that are important to use. List leadership positions, volunteer work in that field, awards, projects, and whatever else you think will help reviewers see that this is not just a passing activity.
2. Use any “short form” essay spaces to point to your standout areas. You may even want to highlight the contrast between your interests, for example, “I am interested in studying in the sciences, but I have also always been drawn to (studying languages, or playing folk music, or human rights issues). Many people would not think of these two things together, but here is how I think about it.”
3. Triangulate yourself in an email of introduction. Many admissions offices assign application readers by a certain geography. If you can find out who the reader is for students coming from your location, you can send an email of introduction. “Dear Ms. Smith, I understand that you may be the application reader for my area. I am planning to apply next week and look forward to you reviewing my credentials. I am a student from Bangladesh, who combines her love of debate, with an academic passion for psychology and understanding

how the human mind works. I am also very involved in my school's environmental program.”

4. Reinforce your points through your recommendations. While you cannot control exactly what your recommenders will say, if you are able to share with them the areas of emphasis you want highlight, they can also refer to them. This gives confirmation to readers that what you are saying is really who you are.

Recommendations

Recommendations are one of the most frequently overlooked opportunities to strengthen your application. Students often think that because most recommendations are positive, reviewers do not give them much credence. This is not necessarily the case. While it is true that many letters of recommendation sound the same, that makes the ones that are unique stick out all the more. In reading recommendations, I find that students typically make a few common mistakes:

1. They choose people who sound impressive but do not know them well.
2. They do not provide enough information for their recommenders about their background.
3. They do not help their readers understand their college or career choices.
4. They do not focus their recommenders on their key points.

Let's look at each of these mistakes in more detail.

Choose recommenders who actually know you.

I understand why it would be tempting for students to choose recommenders simply based on their position or prestige. In many countries this carries more weight than it does in the U.S. But hearing from a head of school or local dignitary who says, “I have heard that Samuel is a good student. I do not believe we have had any disciplinary issues with him. I give him my full support,” is not very helpful.

You should ask people to recommend you who can speak about what makes you different. First of all, they should be able to speak directly to your academic ability. Do you have the ability to be successful at the university level? Can you think independently? Can you be successful in another language if necessary?

Second, they should be able to speak about your character. Are you ethical? Honest? Hard working? Would they trust you to do the right thing? Are you the kind of person they would want in the classroom? As part of the community? Here is a big one, can they attest that you understand the difference between your home country’s system of education and the American system and can be successful despite the differences?

Third, the person should state if they feel you will be a good cultural ambassador for your country. Do you have the ability to adapt quickly and to work with people with many different viewpoints? Are you willing to help others to understand your culture, even while being open minded about other cultures?

A recommender who knows you well can speak more confidently to all of these issues and help your application come across as genuine.

Give your recommenders the tools they need.

The people you choose to write your letters may know you well in one aspect of your life – for example the classroom – but they may not be familiar with others. Often times this makes the letter that they write seem out-of-step with the rest of your application. You indicate in your application that your commitment to your community is your largest passion, but your recommender never mentions it. Or, you indicate on your application that you are passionate about physics, but the biology teacher who writes your recommendation is sure you are going to study biology. These situations create gaps in your application that can raise doubts about its accuracy. In the worst-case scenario, a reader can come to believe you are being dishonest or misleading.

The best way to fix this is to share a resume and activities list with your recommender. With this information they are much more likely to write about you as a whole person and discuss you more accurately. This is actually also kind to your recommender, as it makes the writer's job easier as well. With your resume in hand, your recommenders can craft a letter that will feel personal and ring true.

Share your future

How can your recommender do you justice without knowing your goals? Universities want to know why you chose to apply to them. Telling them it is because they are highly ranked is not a compelling reason. They want to know why you applied to them and not to other competitive colleges. How did you find them? What about the university attracted you and why? Sharing your motivations with your recommenders will help them support you.

Along with your resume, provide information to your recommender about the universities to which you are applying and why. Make sure that your recommenders know what you are planning to study and what your ultimate goal is. Let them know how you found the universities that are of interest to you and if you have any special connections to those places or have done research to indicate that they are a match.

You want your recommenders to be able to speak about you in the superlative. In other words, to be able to say, this is one of the best students I have ever had in my class. Or this is one of the top five students that I have taught in my 20 years of teaching. Or this is one of the most perceptive students that I have worked with. Descriptions of that nature will help you to truly stand out, so encourage your recommenders to focus on specific traits that you might have that you are also focusing on.

After they write your letters, make sure that you keep them informed. Let them know when you've had successes with university entrance, and make sure to follow up and thank them for recommending you.

|| **The Goal**

To make a great impression through your application, the key is to create a clear and consistent message about who you are. Your application readers should be able to quickly and easily summarize what the key benefits would be of admitting you.

Visualize your application reader presenting your application to a group of other admissions officers. What would they say? Which of your talents, experiences, and abilities would they highlight?

What questions might the group ask, and would the answers be easy to find?

For example, if your reader presented you as a student with artistic talent or strong math skills, is there enough proof in your application to answer any questions that might be raised? If they needed more evidence, could they look to your recommendations to confirm these elements from a credible source?

Your job is to make it easy for the group to say “yes.” It is important to understand that most admissions committees tend to be a bit more skeptical of international students because their background is less transparent than domestic students. It is very hard to know the environment that you are coming from or what your grades really mean. It is therefore extremely important to mitigate any of these doubts or biases by presenting a consistent and clear story. You want to make sure that committee members feel like they know the “real you.” You do this by telling your story and making it a complete picture.

Takeaways:

- ◆ University admissions offices are looking for you to tell your story. They want a consistent picture of who you are and what you can contribute to campus.
- ◆ You can use the technique of “triangulation” to make yourself a stronger and more memorable candidate.
- ◆ Selecting good references who know you and can speak to your ability to be successful as a student and a cultural ambassador can significantly strengthen your application.

- ◆ Do not make admissions officers have to guess about items in your application. Make sure that your story can be clearly understood.

Frequently Asked Question

Should I work with an agency to apply to universities?

Ultimately, whether you work with an agency or not is a personal and family question. The answer depends on your comfortability in advocating for yourself in the process and your comfortability with the agent.

Some universities have special arrangements with agencies, so it may help you be noticed, other universities are biased against agencies that do all the application work for their students. There are a few important points to keep in mind:

- ◆ Some agencies charge both students and colleges for their services and don't always disclose that they are doing this. Many agencies can provide helpful services, but remember that at the end of the day they are businesses and their goal is to make money.
- ◆ If you do use an agent, make sure that you stay involved in the process and do not leave everything to the agent. There are certain documents universities are not allowed to send to agents, and certain communication that are meant for you and not your agent. There are also certain parts of the university's online systems you will want to know how to use before you arrive.

To Make a Great Impression, Prepare a Strong Application

- ◆ Make sure you really know the institutions to which you are applying. I have seen a number of students arrive on campus with no idea what the environment would be like or what types of classes they would be taking. That is not a recipe for success.

Chapter 5

MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION THROUGH YOUR ESSAY





Advice from the Experts

“My organization manages a set of General Education and other lower division undergraduate courses called the International Studies Program, in which students enrolled at various partner/ site schools abroad (in Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Dubai and Vietnam) may earn up to 70 transfer credits for transfer to various colleges and universities across the United States, including the University of Lynchburg. We have been running these programs abroad for the past 35 years, and so my staff and I have gained a lot of experience helping students face the range of hurdles they encounter when transferring to the United States.

1. *Many U.S. schools ask or require students to write a short introduction outlining their reasons for applying to that college or university. A few tips on this:*
 - a) *Make sure you include the full name of the school and specify the major to which you intend to apply. Explain how you found out about the school (advisor, internet research, friend, relative, etc.) and why you decided to apply to that school – there may be more than one reason, which is fine (environment, location, major program, proximity of relatives, friends or former classmates attending that school, reputation, affordability, scholarships available, met an advisor from that school).*

How to Impress U.S. Universities

- b) *Make sure you proofread your document – if possible, ask your teacher or a native English speaker to proofread it. Grammatical and spelling mistakes will give a poor impression but you do not need to send a perfect paper! Sometimes a few idiomatic mistakes will show your reader that you are an international student trying his/her best! Use a spell checker and possibly a grammar checker. Do NOT use AI or someone else's work – this is easily spotted and will ruin your chances for admission, as plagiarism is unacceptable in the U.S.*
 - c) *Make sure you talk about yourself and properly identify your previous experience (academic and life) by indication the full name of ay schools attended etc. Avoid acronyms and abbreviations - your reader will not know what “AUY” means unless you tell him/ her!*
 - d) *Honesty is always best!*
2. *When you meet with an advisor (admissions officer, major advisor, professor) at the school it is best to use an honorific (Ms./Mr./Dr.) and last name rather than be “too informal” at first – the person you are talking to will tell you to “call me John” if this is what that person wants – one can never make a mistake being too formal, but one certainly can give a bad impression by being too “friendly” or “casual” in initial meetings. This will also apply for interviews with school administrators and visa officers if/when you have to have a visa interview for a student visa. Honesty is always the best policy but, in the case of visa officers, making sure to only answer the question you are asked is the best approach.*
 3. *Essay writing is quite possibly the MOST IMPORTANT skill one can possess for success in an American academic environment. Almost all American universities have writing centers staffed by senior or graduate students – use them! That's what they are there for, and they are usually well prepared and happy to help you with organizing your essays. American professors almost always stress the critical thinking*

Make a Great Impression Through Your Essay

skills one learns in (if not before) an academic literary class, which all students are required to take – critical thinking means the ability to organize and present your ideas logically, including making sure your opinions are supported by relevant facts, making sure you are writing a clear introduction and conclusion, and making sure your essay is checked for grammatical and spelling errors.

4. *Our students often ask us for advice on how to choose the best college, university, or major. We usually respond by turning this back to the student, who is in the best position to decide a) what type of environment he/she prefers – there are advantages and disadvantages to larger schools vs. smaller schools – the former have more major programs, more clubs, more activities, while the latter offer (in many cases) a friendlier atmosphere with better personal attention from faculty, staff and fellow students. The same can be said for attending school in a large city (which offer more things to do but there are more distractions) vs. attending school in a small town (friendlier and with more personal attention, easier to focus on studies) The weather can be a factor as well (students who dislike winter should avoid the northern states or schools in the mountains; students who don't like hot and humid environments should avoid schools in the Southeast), since if the student is unhappy, his/her studies will generally not go well. Perhaps the most important aspect of choosing a good fit is NOT choosing a school or a major based on friends' (or even parental) advice -they may be giving you their best advice but it is YOU who are going there!*
5. *Regarding understanding U.S. Higher Education – American education is unique for a number of reasons:*
 - a) *U.S. schools have General Education requirements – the purpose is threefold – to give students a chance to experiment in various academic areas prior to choosing a major (most European and Asian schools require the student to select a major at the beginning*

of their academic career and it cannot be changed), to give the student a well-rounded education (for most European and Asian degrees, students only take courses specified by their major department), and to give the university a chance to insure that students are well prepared to move on to their major (by building critical thinks skills across a range of study areas)

- b) *U.S. schools are competitive – Scholarships are awarded based on grade point average or “marks” earned, and only the “best” students earn (academic) scholarships. Students have to maintain a GPA to stay enrolled and will be dismissed if grades fall below certain standards. Grades are internally competitive (only the “best few” earn “A” grades in each class. Not all of the students who are admitted will graduate (in most Asian and European schools, students graduate almost by virtue of having been admitted, which means it is difficult to GET in but not difficult to STAY in. American schools are generally easier on admission (they will give you a chance!) but graduation standards are stringent. The competitive nature of American schools reflects our society and is the reason why so many American schools are highly regarded and why so many international students choose to go to American universities.”*

Dirk Binder

CEO, The Center for Advanced Studies

Tokyo, Japan

Perhaps no area of university applications inspires quite as much fear as finding a good essay topic and developing it fully. For many students, this is a cause of great anxiety. Many believe that their entire opportunity for success depends upon selecting the perfect content and delivering it flawlessly.

The truth is, that while essays are important, they are only one piece of the puzzle. Still, they do represent a great opportunity for you to stand out from other candidates, and to bring the human element to your application. While many of the pieces of your application are quantitative, and difficult to change, the essay is one area where you have a lot of freedom and can present something that will be memorable.

Selecting a Topic

The first challenge students typically have is selecting a topic. I believe many students feel that they have to pick something truly original, that no one has ever thought of before, in order to stand out. This is not the case. You can write an excellent essay on a familiar idea because you are a unique person with a unique perspective. Still, you will be well ahead of most applicants if you avoid topics that are used very frequently.

In the United States, some topics are used over and over. This tends to make readers skip over them. The essays that I have seen the most are things like students recounting how their athletic team had to pull together to achieve a great victory. I have even nicknamed this essay, “The Big Game,” since it is so common. Students often recount how they had to overcome adversity to triumph on the field. There is nothing wrong with this topic. It can be done well, but essays of this type are so common that it is hard to stand out.

This is also the case for students who write about some form of the person that they most admire. This was a common essay prompt years ago, and it has stuck with us. Many students will write

about friends or family members who overcame hardship to gain the writer's respect. Again, not a bad topic, but very frequent.

Other very common topics include first travel experiences in other countries and what students have learned from them, and family tragedies. This last topic is particularly challenging. Students often choose to write about very heavy themes in their lives and the very difficult things that have transpired. In and of itself, this is not a bad thing, as this does teach the reader something important about you. But these essays come with a lot of pitfalls.

First, in their effort to be authentic, some students share more than they should. They may delve into areas like mental health, suicide, or abuse. Keep in mind that these types of issues may backfire on you and signal to the reader that you are a high risk to admit into the university community. They may decide that they do not have the necessary support in place for you, especially since you are coming so far.

The other issue is that these are just difficult topics to handle well in your writing. You may share something that offends your reader. Or you may just depress them. Think about it, what if you had to read tragic essays for six or seven hours a day? What if every essay was an appeal to the person's sympathy? That would be exhausting, and you would probably be really excited and spend more time reading essays that were upbeat and reminded you of the good in life.

International students often choose different topics than U.S. students, but they can still fall into the trap of selecting very common topics. The one I see most often is discussions of poverty and requests for support. While these may be accurate, they tend to be so common that readers cannot help but tune them out. Yes,

they understand that students from many countries do not have as many financial opportunities and may need more support, but the frequency of that topic just makes it easy to skim over.

Topics to Consider

When I work with domestic students, I will often encourage them to write about a national or international issue. Do they have an opinion on something of global consequence? How does that subject impact them personally? How did they arrive at their opinion?

This is an interesting possible topic for international students, but it can also be a dangerous one. Your opinion is likely to be very different than many American students because of the lens of your experience, which is amazing in the classroom. In your essay, however, it can be easy to strongly state an opinion that is either offensive to the person reading it, or which shows limited cultural understanding. For this reason, I would never choose a topic that revolved around American politics or its role in the world. Similarly, I would probably not choose a religious topic, or something that spoke against other countries. While we would hope that an essay reader would be objective, we are all human and have our biases. It is too easy to let them influence us.

So, now that we have looked at what not to write, how do we find a topic that will serve you well?

One of my favorite options is to shift from an issue of national or international concern to one that is more local. I have seen this work very well for many students. They start by saying something like, “In my state or province, we have this tradition.” Or, “One of

the things my community really values is...” Or, “I grew up in a town where...” Students then go on to share their insights into a local custom or a piece of local history. They share how this event impacts them or how it has shaped who they are. They might share if they have taken an active role in either supporting or preserving this aspect of their local culture, or they may recount how they have tried to influence or change it.

What I love about this essay is that, as a reader, it almost always teaches me something that I do not know. I learn about the place, but I also learn about the student, and how they have been shaped by their upbringing. I also get to see the student in action. Instead of just giving an unfounded opinion on a huge issue, they are speaking from real experience about a topic that they truly know. It also often helps me see the potential for leadership in students. Often, this topic demonstrates that the student can “think globally but act locally.” It always makes me think, “If they are able to analyze or influence the situation on a small, local scale, I wonder what they could accomplish on a really big stage.” This topic is almost always a winner.

The other essay that I almost always appreciate is one in which students position themselves as global or cultural ambassadors. Maybe this is because of my own experience studying abroad, but it seems to me that this topic is a natural fit for many international students. So often, international students present themselves as one-dimensional. It as if they were trying to confirm a stereotype. They are coming to study computer science, medicine, or business. They are focused on getting a great job to support their family. What I do not often hear is, “This is what I am looking forward to bringing to my experience and this is what I hope to learn.”

You have a natural advantage in that you bring a different perspective. Think about how you could use this perspective to make the university a more interesting place. Will you join the international club and take on a leadership role? Will you share your cultural perspective in class? Do you hope to make American friends and have the opportunity to experience American customs and transitions? How will you contribute to the university community?

Perhaps even more exciting, what will you do after your university study? How will you use what you learn and your experience to make you into a better person? How will it contribute to you making a difference in the world? Will you take what you learn as a doctor, computer scientist, or business leader and use it to fix problems in your home country? Will you leverage your experience to become a citizen of the world and do something that will make a mark? What is your trajectory?

Think about it like this: Why would I invest in you? You may think that you are paying for college, but really no student pays the full cost of their education. Some portion of your education will be funded by alumni donations, grant funding, and the university itself. If you receive scholarship funding, this is even more the case.

If you were a product that was pitched to me by the research and development team, would I choose to invest in you? If I did, it would not be because you had a great high school record, or had the highest average, or the best family connections. It would be because I thought you had the best “runway” – meaning you were the most likely candidate to go on and do something meaningful with your life that would reflect well on the university. That is the

kind of ambassador I want to see, and it is the kind of story you want to tell in your essay.

Once you have the right topic and know the message that you want to get across, it is a matter of choosing the right style and delivering it well.

Essay Style and Content

One of the more challenging aspects of writing a good essay if you are a stranger to American culture is getting your tone correct. Tone is the voice that you write in. Is it friendly, informative, sympathetic, persuasive? What emotion are you trying to convey to the reader? What are you hoping they will feel?

I typically counsel students to use the tone that is most true to their personality. A humorous, fun tone can be excellent if that is your personality. It can give your reader a pleasant break from more serious essays that take up most of their day, but I would only recommend this if it is actually you. If you are fun, write fun, but if humor does not come that naturally to you, do not attempt it. If you are serious, factual, and understated, write that way. It will reinforce what you say about yourself and the picture you are trying to create. If you are not sure what type of person you are, ask friends or family for their feedback. What is your strength? How do people typically react to you? How do you make them feel? Allow that best part of your personality to come across in what you write.

It may seem obvious, but you need to make sure that you have a fully developed concept for your essay. Your essay should have a clear opener with a thesis statement. It should have multiple body paragraphs developing the idea, and it should have a concluding

paragraph that reinforces the thesis. Have your essay reviewed to make sure you are clearly developing your idea and ask your readers if they can pick out the main point of what you are trying to say about yourself. Ask them if they can tell what you want the reader to remember.

The other key is to have your essay proofread well – not edited, but proofread. If you are a student from another country, reviewers will not expect you to write in perfect, American English, and in fact, may be a little suspicious if you do. They will, however, expect you to eliminate obvious grammar mistakes and misspellings. Take the time to have your essay proofed by someone, maybe more than one person, to prevent any obvious errors.

The most important tip: do not put the name of the wrong university in your essay!

You would be surprised how often this happens. Students apply to multiple universities and they forget to change the name of the institution. They end up with the wrong name in the essay and instantly create a negative reaction from their reader. Just to be safe, I would avoid using the name at all, or have it checked very carefully to make sure that the right essay is going to the right place. American universities are strangely sensitive about finding a sense of loyalty with their students, and this will definitely trigger a negative reaction.

The Goal

While your essay is not the be all and end all of your application, it is an important tool to help you differentiate yourself. It is the easiest place to tell your story and to highlight the things about you

that you most want the reader to remember. Take full advantage of your essay by selecting a topic that is not overused, choosing a tone that fits with who you are, and having your essay proofed well to make sure it is ready for review.

You will demonstrate that you are a great candidate through your essay if you can teach your readers a few things about yourself. First, you want to demonstrate that you have a good command of the English language, which will reassure the reader that you will be successful in the classroom. Second, you want to help them get to know something important about you. How do you think? What do you value? What do you imagine for the future? This will reassure them that you will also be successful in the community.

If you can accomplish these two things with authenticity and in your own style, you will stand out from most other applicants.

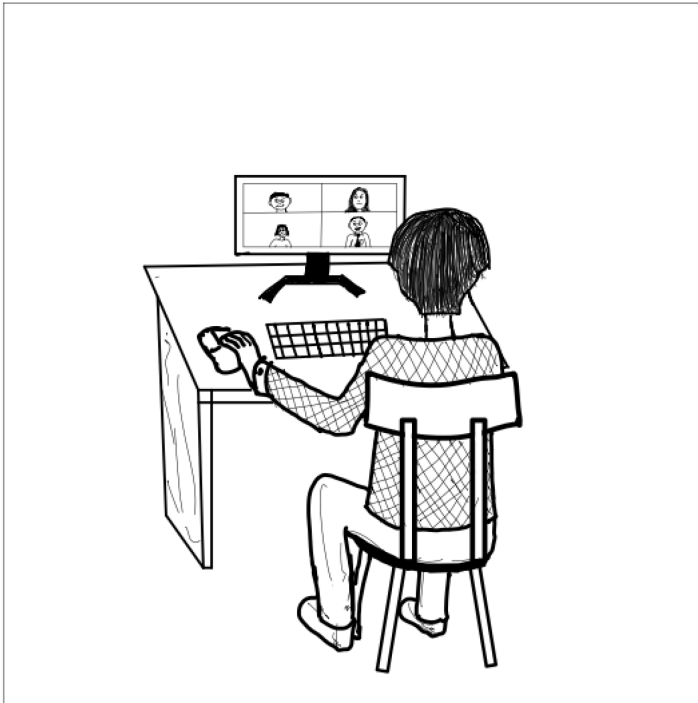
At the end of the book, I have included recent sample essays that stood out to me and demonstrated a few of the points above.

Takeaways:

- ◆ You can make a better impression by avoiding certain overused or difficult to convey topics.
- ◆ Essays that cover international or local topics, or those that focus on the student's ability to be a cultural ambassador are often good choices.
- ◆ Choose an essay tone that is natural to you, but also will leave a positive impression on your reader.
- ◆ Make sure your essay presents a fully-developed thought, and have it thoroughly proofread.

Chapter 6

MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION BY INTERVIEWING





Advice from the Expert

“Here they care about what you did other than study and if you made a difference in any way. They are very understanding of special situations. For example, if someone in your family passed away during the first half and your grades dropped, they consider it a lot when they see your history.

The last part of the application is writing essays. There's an essay about your life. It's usually done about some challenge you went through and how you overcame it. The idea is to show your essence through your writing, in the essay, and in questions that require more precise answers.

All these things have to be sent through an online platform.

I think that's the most general thing. It's a holistic process that considers every part of your life. Everyone has the opportunity to prove that they belong to the university they are applying to and that they deserve it!! It is possible to enter, and it is possible to pay for college in the United States. It opens the doors to the whole world.”

Ingrid Kawaltz Blanco

Interpreter and Social Justice Worker

Student from Chile

Interviewing with a university another area that causes many students concern. Students picture in their minds serious and stodgy old men looking to find something wrong with every applicant. In the majority of cases, however, this is not what the interview dynamic is like.

For most colleges and universities, conducting interviews is about finding the right fit with students. It is an opportunity to understand how the student thinks and how they react in the moment, without much preparation. Much like in the application review process, however, it is important to remember that the interviewer wants to like you. No one wants to throw away 30 minutes of their life in a purposeless way. Every interviewer would prefer that the time they spend with candidates is interesting, entertaining, or even exciting. Your job in the interview is to help this be true.

If you are living internationally, you may have the opportunity to do your interview in person on campus, but in most cases your interview will be virtual. In a few cases it might even be with an alumnus of the college who lives close to you. Any of these three can help you in the process if you make the most of the opportunity.

Should You Interview?

From my experience, 80 to 90% of interviews help the student in the process. It is typically easier to like a person face-to-face, and it is more difficult to reject them than if all you are looking at is a piece of paper. Still, there are a few things that you can do that can turn the interview to your disadvantage.

The first of these, is to be overly direct or pushy. In some cultures, it is perfectly acceptable to be very direct, to negotiate, or to try to talk the other person into what you want. This typically does not work well with an American interviewer. The interviewer expects to be in a position of authority, and they would expect the student to be polite and considerate. This does not mean you always have to be serious. It is definitely okay to use humor, to smile, to laugh and to enjoy the conversation. But think about it as if you are trying to make a friend, not trying to get a desired outcome, and your interview will typically go much better.

The other big challenge for many international students is the language. When you are preparing your application and writing your essay, you can carefully craft what you want to say and you can have people check to make sure your English is good. It is much more difficult when you are in the moment in an interview and have to think of answers to questions and the right words to go with them.

I find that one thing that helps is to remind your interviewer that you are nervous. This is perfectly understandable, but it appeals to the human element of the conversation. Maybe this is the first time you have done a college interview. Maybe this is the first time you have talked to an American. Maybe this is the first time you have had an English conversation with a native speaker. Sharing these things will not be a negative, in fact, they will realize that you are being brave to do the interview. They will tend to give you additional grace because they realize that you are nervous and that it is natural.

One thing I also would suggest is to have a couple of phrases that you can go to when you need a minute to think. So, for example, if an interviewer asks you a question and you need a

minute to think about your answer, you could say something like, “That is a really good question. I’ve never thought about that before. Let me think for a minute.” This gives you a moment to consider, while at the same time signaling to the interviewer that you are taking the question very seriously. For students who are nervous about their English, I also suggest another phrase. If you are asked something and you are not sure if you understood it, before you ask if they can say it again, try saying, “Let me see if I understood you correctly. So, you are asking...” and repeat back something close to what you think they are asking you. This may seem like a subtle difference, but trust me, psychologically it is different.

If you ask them to repeat themselves, they will assume that you might not have understood them at all. If you give them a chance to clarify, even if your response is not that close to the original question, they will perceive your language as stronger, and think that they just did not express themselves clearly enough.

That doesn’t mean you should never ask them to repeat themselves, or only use this phrase, but it can really help to slow down the conversation and to remind the interviewer to speak with clarity, even while you are seen as being thoughtful and trying to express your thoughts fully.

One important note if you are worried about your English level. Make sure you do not put yourself at a disadvantage because of the technology.

Try to make sure you are in a quiet space when you’re interviewing so that you can hear well. If you are not, or if the quiet is interrupted by something unexpected, do not try to pretend that nothing is happening. Alert the interviewer that you might be a little

distracted, or that the noise might distract them. Ask if they would prefer to reschedule when there is less background noise, or at least let them know that you might have a little trouble hearing. You do not want something in the background to make it seem like you do not understand the language.

It is same with the technology itself. If you have a bad connection that prevents you from hearing or seeing clearly, it is definitely OK to bring this to the interviewer's attention. Offer to call them back to get a better connection, or to reschedule if you have continued issues. Again, the interviewer may decline, but that will at least alert them to why you might be struggling to hear and respond correctly.

How to Make the Interview Work for You

Arrive Early

Whether your interview is in person or virtual, I always recommend arriving early. Different countries have different concepts of time, but in American culture, punctuality is important, especially in professional settings. If you are interviewing in person, arrive on campus 15 to 20 minutes early so that you can make sure you arrive at the right office and that you have time to breathe and collect your thoughts. Most admissions offices have pleasant waiting areas for you to relax ahead of your interview, so arriving early is typically not a problem.

If your interview is virtual, try to be in the virtual waiting room five minutes before unless otherwise instructed. You will often experience technical issues or may have to download or update software you do not expect. If you arrive “just on time,” these

unexpected delays can create a lot of stress for both you and the interviewer. Arriving on time is a sign of respect.

Check Your Background

If you are interviewing virtually, make sure that your background is appropriate. It does not have to be professional or perfect, but make sure it is pleasant. You can use your room, but just make sure there is nothing inappropriate, dirty, or political behind you.

Come Prepared

Preparation is your best friend in interview situations. This is an area that many people struggle with. I think they are unsure how to prepare.

I would first check the university's website to see if they share much information about their values, their structure, or their current important programs. Note how the university describes its community culture. If you can find any kind of strategic plan, take the time to at least skim it to get an idea of what the institution is officially committed to doing. If you know the name of the person with whom you will interview look them up to see if you might have things in common.

Most of the questions you will be asked, however, will be about you, so it is more important that you know how to speak about yourself and to be able to talk about how you have handled situations in the past. My secret weapon for interviews has always been to create a list of the questions that I think I am likely to be asked and actually write out my answers to those questions.

This is not difficult to do. Google can easily provide you with the most common interview questions. Pick 10-15 and write out responses. For example, it is highly likely that you will be asked:

Why are you interested in this university?

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Tell us about a time when you had to demonstrate (leadership, resilience, creativity, resourcefulness, etc.)?

What do you hope to do when you graduate?

How do you handle stress/pressure?

Why are you interested in this major?

Tell us about a time that you made a mistake and what you did about it?

These are all standard questions, and there are a few more that almost always appear in one form or another during an interview. Why would you go into an interview blindly when you can predict much of what you will be asked?

If you take the time to write out the answers to these questions, you will not be scrambling on the spot to think of good examples. The bonus is that preparing ahead of time not only allows you to answer these exact questions, but it allows you to extrapolate to other similar questions.

For example, let's say you prepare for the strengths and weaknesses question. Maybe your interviewer will not ask that, but instead something like, "Tell us one area you would like to grow," or "How will you be able to contribute to the campus community?" Can you see how these are just other forms of the same question?

If you already have an answer mapped out about your strengths and weaknesses, your brain will automatically tap into it to answer these related questions. There really are only a small number of actual topics you are likely to get questions about, even though the questions may be formulated differently.

I recommend writing out your list of questions as early as possible. Then I spend much of my prep time reviewing them. I don't fully commit them to memory, so that they do not sound rehearsed, but I familiarize myself with them enough that they come to mind easily when I'm asked that kind of question. This technique is the number one confidence-builder in interview situations.

Prepare Questions

You need a list of questions that you want to ask going into an interview. Sometime in the last portion of the interview you will almost always be asked, "What questions do you have for me?" It is always an awkward moment when a candidate says, "None."

Many people make the mistake of preparing only two or three questions, but what happens if those topics come up in the normal course of the interview? You would then be left with nothing to ask. So, it is better to have 5-7 questions ready. This shows that the interview is important to you.

The safest question to start with is something that reinforces that if you are admitted, you will excel. Ask what types of students are most successful at the university. Ask what the university hopes that students will contribute to the community. Ask what the ideal graduate looks like. Ask what their advice would be to help you be successful in your first month on campus.

If you need a safe question to fill some time, turn the tables and ask the interviewer why they chose to work at the university or what they like best about it.

As with common interview questions, you can easily ask Google to help you with a list of good questions to ask. One that not many people think of, but I have always been impressed by, is to ask near the end, “What haven’t you asked me that you would really like to ask?” This is a great way to tease out any underlying doubts that people might be hesitant to vocalize. If you can bring them to the surface, you have a chance to address concerns that could negatively impact you in the application process.

Take Notes

This might sound like a small thing, but bring a notebook with you. This can help you in all kinds of ways. Write relevant bullet points from your pre-prepared questions and the questions for you to ask that I think might be most relevant. You can ask, “Is it okay if I take a few notes?” That gives you an excuse to consult your notes, should you need to. When you are asked if I have any questions, I answer “yes” and consult my list, which helps you look prepared.

Be Engaging

Remember, the most important thing is that the interviewer wants to enjoy your time together, so your job is to help that to happen. Be friendly. Smile. Laugh. Be passionate about the things that matter to you. Be curious about the university and the person who is interviewing you. Show that you have a flexible mindset and a global perspective Demonstrate that you want to learn and that you want to contribute to the university community. It is okay to

be nervous, that just means you are human, but try to help your interviewer have fun and learn more about you.

Send a Thank You

It might sound old-fashioned, but people do appreciate “thank-you” notes, and they do pay attention to them. Today it is more common to send a thank-you email than a handwritten note, but whatever form it takes, a follow-up thank you does make a difference. It says something about who you are as a person, and it says that you know that your interviewer’s time is valuable. It does make a difference. So, make your mom happy and send a thank you.

The interview is your opportunity to convince universities that you have the people skills and emotional intelligence to go far in life. In business, this is sometimes called a person’s “runway,” which means that I can see what you have accomplished so far, but it is clear that it is only the beginning. Based on what I learn from you in your interview, and your ability to create connections with others, I become confident that you are like a plane getting ready to launch and take off to higher places.

That is the impression that you want to create. You do not need to convince the interviewer that you are perfect. Instead, your goal is to help them see your potential.

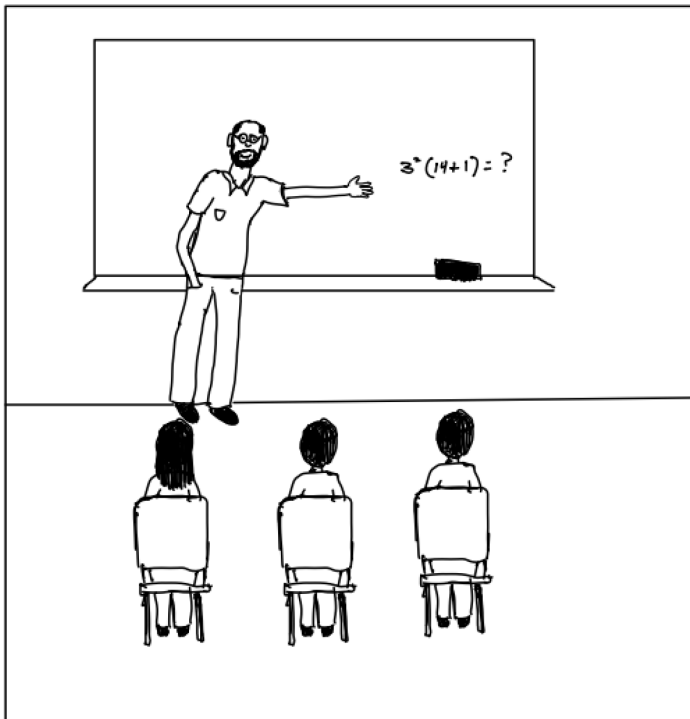
Takeaways:

- ◆ Some universities offer interviews and some do not. Some require them and other make them optional.
- ◆ Typically, interviews will help you as an applicant by adding a human element to your application.

- ◆ They usually only hurt candidates if their English is poor, they are rude or pushy, or they have difficulty understanding socially acceptable interactions.
- ◆ The interviewer wants to like you. Your job is to help them.
- ◆ It is okay to share that you are nervous, and there are a few techniques that you can use to help relax the interview atmosphere.
- ◆ You can control many of the factors in an interview by being prepared for the questions you are likely to receive and by preparing the questions you want to ask.

Chapter 7

MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION BY STRENGTHENING YOUR ENGLISH





Advice from the Experts

“Studying in the U.S. can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life, opening the door to future career opportunities. The challenges you encounter while studying abroad prepare you to become a leader capable of overcoming the obstacles of the future. The more diverse and challenging your study abroad experience, the more you will grow, enhancing the overall reward of the experience.

Often, students coming to the U.S. identify speaking English as one of their primary motivations, but also as one of the first challenges they will face. Proficiency in English is crucial for meeting the test score requirements of your desired school, for your visa interview, and for seamlessly fitting into everyday life and your school experience.

Regardless of the level of study you plan to undertake in the U.S., I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of daily English-speaking practice BEFORE you depart. Develop the habit of daily English-speaking practice at least 3 to 6 months before your departure. This will contribute to a much smoother and more successful experience right from the start, enhancing your confidence.”

Matthew Sussman

CEO & Co-founder FLOW Speak flowspeak.io

Former Executive Director of Fulbright Japan

Most colleges and universities will require students to demonstrate English proficiency. They often consider this requirement as an “ability to benefit.” In other words, if students do not have sufficient English skills, they are not really able to get the full benefit of the educational environment that the institution offers.

There are several ways that students can prove competency, depending on the institution’s requirements.

Testing

English language testing is the most common method. The long-time standard test is the TOEFL, but most institutions also accept other scores, such as the IELTS or Cambridge tests. Duolingo has grown rapidly in popularity and more schools have added it as an option. Each school will publish its own required scores on its website for each test.

Proof of English Instruction

Obviously, some students come as native English speakers, but some universities may even ask for proof of this. Some institutions will waive English for certain countries. Others will ask for proof that instruction is conducted in English. Some students can qualify based on taking an English course at another university, or the university may have a partnership with an organization from which they will accept English.

ESL Programs

Some institutions run their own English programs. These universities will often offer conditional admission to students to enroll first in their English language programs. Some will base acceptance on just completion of the program, while others will require internal testing to ensure that students are at the proper level. Some universities also partner with independent English language programs and will accept their graduates.

Interviewing

A few colleges and universities will allow students to qualify based on a virtual interview. This option has increased in popularity as offices have become more comfortable with utilizing virtual tools. There is also increasing recognition that performing well on a test does not always match conversational skills, and the interview can be a way to address this. Still, interviewing for English competency is the exception in the field.

English language is typically one of the most quantitative measures that many universities look at, so it is worthwhile making sure your English is as strong as it can be. This is not only because you are more likely to be admitted, but also because you are more likely to succeed when you arrive. Admissions offices hear concerns about language ability from their faculty, so improving your scores is one of the most effective ways to be seen as a strong candidate.

Tips for Improving Your English

I have written an entire book on learning languages quickly that I encourage you to read, but in the meantime, let me include an excerpt that I think is most relevant if you are trying to quickly improve your English ability for college entrance and for your arrival.

Most schools of thought divide language learning into four main skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Speaking and writing are considered active skills, while listening and reading are considered passive. When I look at traditional language learning, the heavy emphasis is typically on the passive skills. We learn from written materials or by listening to audio materials. This is also the case in many language programs to which you might subscribe. They are mostly based on listening and reading.

The challenge is that these passive skills do not give your brain an intense enough workout to really cement the language. They are not bad; they are just S-L-O-W! To really master language rapidly, your brain has to actively engage with it. It needs to practice rapid recall. It needs to have the opportunity to bend and manipulate the language to get a point across.

The problem is that providing active learning for students is hard. It is much more labor-intensive than providing passive content that language learners can consume *en masse*. With active learning, every participant needs a chance to actively engage, and in a group, it is difficult to give everyone enough active time.

A few of the language programs help with this when they allow open spaces for you to repeat and practice in the middle of what

you are learning. These are great tools, and a big improvement over passive-only systems.

I'm going to suggest that YOU need to be in charge of your own active learning

That might sound intimidating, but it is really not that difficult and does not take that much time. Compare it to exercising. Passive learning is like the exercise you do for toning. To keep in shape and stay lean, you might do 20 push-ups, 30 sit-ups, 20 minutes of jogging, or lift a few light weights. On the other hand, if you want to really push your muscles to grow, you might do a few sets of heavy weights with low repetition, or high-intensity intervals. They do not take very long, but they overload the body quickly and help to get maximum results.

Try that with your language learning as well. When I speak to people who have started the language journey but need to improve to reach a goal, I tell them to spend at least 5-10 minutes per day *creating* language instead of absorbing it.

Sit down and write for five to ten minutes straight — any topic, any idea, stream of consciousness, whatever. Think about what this does for you. First, it pushes you to speed up your recall of information. Second, it gives you practice manipulating the language as a set of tools that can be rearranged however you need them. It also shows you where your gaps are. If your brain keeps having to struggle with certain pieces, it will bring those to the top of your mind and begin to absorb that information better so that writing will be easier.

Do the same thing with speaking. Spend 5-10 minutes a day actively speaking and practicing in the language. It might be hard to

find someone who is willing to practice with you every day. This is not a problem. Speaking to yourself also works. Talk to yourself when you are driving, washing dishes, taking a shower, or doing other mundane tasks. Talk to your dog as you go on a walk. If you are a person of faith, pray in the new language. Recount a conversation and translate it. Write down song lyrics and translate them. Talk to your car as if it were a person — whatever it takes — **but actively use the language every day.**

Why is using the language daily important? That is how your brain likes to learn. It absorbs best in regular, bite-sized pieces. Five to 10 minutes a day, every day, is much better than a few cram sessions per week. You keep the language fresh in your mind. You get your tongue used to the feel of the language and your ear used to the cadence. Language learning is muscle memory for your brain, and you want to work those muscles every day.

If you do this for a few days, you will find yourself thinking about how you would translate everything that you hear. Before you know it, your brain will start converting your thoughts directly into the new language without translating.

The Goal

Make yourself a great candidate for universities by reassuring them that your language skills are where they need to be. Get preparation help if you need it before testing. Test a few times or try different exams to see if you naturally perform better on some than others. Take practice tests to reduce your nervousness on the actual test date.

You can also send other signals that your English is strong enough to benefit from a U.S. education. Your recommenders can help you by indicating your high level of English, especially if their own English level is strong. If you have been involved in clubs or activities that require you use your English, highlight these. Get certifications, sign up for an online class at a U.S. university, even if you only audit it. Include additional writing samples if the university allows it and your writing is strong. Document other opportunities you have had to use your language. Submit a video introduction of yourself.

While these other elements will not likely be able to substitute for your testing, especially if you are on the edge, they might help give an admissions committee the additional confidence in you to give you an opportunity. Remember, admissions committee use the English tests, not because they are perfect (everyone knows they are not) but because they are the best objective measure that is easily available. If you can provide additional evidence, you can make a case that your English is strong, even if you do not test as well as you would like. American universities believe in test anxiety, so some will be open to your case if you can give them enough additional evidence.

If your testing is excellent, also use that to your advantage. Share with your readers why you think that is. Point to it as an advantage, especially if you are strong in conversation.

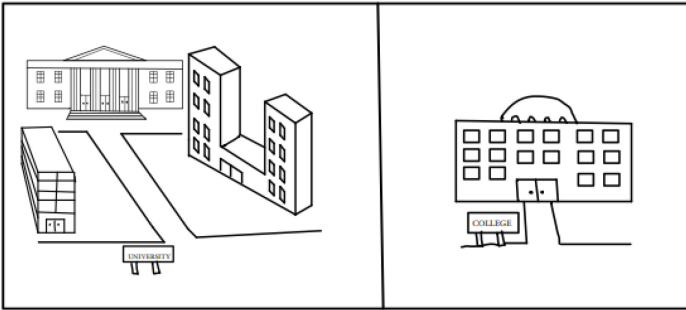
Strong English preparation makes you a low-risk student for admissions offices to accept. It reinforces that you are a good choice.

Takeaways:

- ◆ There are multiple ways that students can demonstrate English proficiency, depending on the policies of each university.
- ◆ Admissions offices take English preparation seriously because of the concerns of the university faculty for students' ability to be successful in the classroom.
- ◆ To have strong English ability, you need to take charge of your learning process and focus on active learning techniques like the ones highlighted in this chapter.
- ◆ There are elements you can use to give supporting evidence of your language ability. While they will not substitute for documented proof of language ability, they may help if a university is undecided about your application.

Chapter 8

MAKE A GREAT IMPRESSION BY YOUR APPROACH TO FINANCES





Advice from the Expert

“When applying for financial aid (from Pakistan), research universities' financial aid policies thoroughly. Not all U.S. universities offer financial assistance to international students. Look for institutions that are known to be generous with aid to international students, and ensure your application is thorough and compelling to maximize your chances of receiving aid.

Be aware of the deadlines for financial aid applications. Missing a deadline can result in missing out on valuable financial assistance. Create a timeline for yourself and stay organized to ensure you submit all required documents on time.

Understanding the holistic review process is key. U.S. admissions offices look beyond grades and test scores to learn about the person behind the application. Highlight your unique experiences, passions, and ambitions in your essays and interviews to make a memorable impression.

Developing a strong extracurricular profile can greatly enhance your application. Consider participating in high school-level research projects or internships to demonstrate your academic curiosity and potential. Additionally, if possible, establish connections with U.S. higher education institutions through programs, conferences, or online courses. These experiences can not only enrich

your academic journey but also provide valuable insights and networks for your future endeavors."

Mashal Khan (*she/ her/ hers*)

Senior EducationUSA Adviser, Islamabad

In earlier decades of international education, universities typically enrolled a few students with larger scholarships, but the vast majority of students were expected to be “full-pay,” meaning they could pay for the entire bill themselves. To this day, many people in education believe that international students only come from wealthy families who can afford to pay the entire amount.

Obviously, the world, and higher education, has changed. Today, the majority of students coming internationally are seeking significant financial assistance from colleges and universities. This can be a real challenge, as the past few years in particular in higher education have been difficult ones financially for institutions. The overall number of students in the United States is shrinking and the rate of students going to college is also declining. Competition has increased as most universities continue to try to grow. This means that there are not a lot of extra financial resources to go around.

Most domestic U.S. students receive some support from either the national government or their state governments to support them in their education. Sometimes this is free grant money. Other times it is access to low-interest loans or work opportunities. Students complete the FAFSA form through the federal government and their results are sent to the universities of their choice to help inform those universities how much financial help students need. The FAFSA is available to U.S. citizens and permanent residents, but not international students on a typical F-1 (student) visa.

Most of the support for international students comes directly from the universities themselves in the form of scholarships. Most universities do not offer need-based funding as it is too difficult for them to accurately verify your finances internationally.

As with many things in U.S. higher education, every institution is different in its policies and practices. Some offer no scholarships for international students. Some offer a few, selection-based awards, while others offer a wide range. Typically, the university's website will list the basic information. If not, you can ask the admissions office, although, as I suggested earlier, I would not recommend that as a first question.

Some universities have specific scholarships for which you must apply. These may be competitions, or specialty scholarships for Honors, artistic talent, or in the case of Division I and II institutions, athletic scholarships. At many institutions, however, there is not an additional scholarship application required. You are automatically considered for all possible scholarships. At these institutions, it is more likely that you will know your scholarship award at the time of admission or soon after, in contrast to those with scholarship applications, which often wait until an application deadline to assign funding.

The biggest challenge for most international students looking for funding is that there are not many backup options if you do not receive enough from scholarships. There are very few loan companies in the U.S. that will provide loans to international students without an American cosigner. If students are looking to borrow, they will often have to do so in their home countries. This can also be a challenge, since students have to demonstrate that they

have funding for at least their first year's worth of expenses before enrolling.

The Certificate of Finance

Universities collect financial information in one of two ways, they either require it at the point of application or they ask for it after admission, but before issuing visa documentation. Most institutions will utilize some form of Certificate of Finance (COF) document, in which the family commits to pay for the student's expenses and indicates the sources. Sometimes these documents are also called Declaration of Finance documents. Families then typically have to provide bank statements that demonstrate that they have sufficient funds in a way that can be easily accessed. Typically, these bank statements must be recent (typically within 90 days). Some institutions require that there be an official conversion to dollars, others do not. Sometimes universities will accept notarized letters from an accountant confirming the funds.

Certificate of Finance documents are often very confusing for families, even though many universities work hard to clarify them. The certificate of finance is basically a contract-like document that the student and the student's sponsor (often parents) sign that indicates that the student understands the cost of the education and how much the family will be expected to pay. The student and sponsor(s) indicate that they have the ability to pay this amount and are committed to doing so.

One of the elements of this document that confuses people most is that it includes not only the actual amount that families owe to the university (called direct costs or direct charges), but also additional expenses that the student is likely to incur by studying

international. This is often surprising to families. They have typically agreed to a certain price based on the tuition, housing, and meals and any scholarship funding the student receives. When they see the Certificate of Finance, the total number is higher. This is because the federal government requires that families be able to support their students for all of their educational expenses, not just those paid directly to the institution.

The indirect costs include things like an assumed amount for travel and estimates for insurance, books, and miscellaneous living expenses that the student is likely to need. This makes sense if seen from the government's point of view. If the student budgets only enough to pay for their tuition and housing, what happens when they need to buy books? What happens if they need to go to the pharmacy? The government is making sure that families do not budget the bare minimum and then end up short, with the institution or federal agencies having to either help the student or send them home.

So, do not be surprised if the amount is different on the Certificate of Finance. You will not be directly charged for all of the indirect items. The U.S. government is helping you to have a transparent view of what the educational experience will really cost, so that no one can advertise a low price but then leave students in a difficult situation.

Bank Statements

As noted, in addition to the family's (or sponsor's) written agreement that they will support the student for the cost of the education, institutions are required to collect bank statements or other documents that prove that the family or sponsor have the

ability to pay the amount required. These documents must be recent, and clearly demonstrate the funding either in dollars or another denomination that can be easily converted.

There is a temptation for families to misrepresent their financial information in order to help gain admission for their student's. Institutions realize this, and have become better over time at spotting the tricks that people use to break the rules. Universities take the ethics of this very seriously, as they are responsible for the student's immigration status. While universities certainly do not catch every falsified document or quick manipulation of accounts, I can tell there is typically no mercy for students who are found to have misrepresented their documents. Typically, they are immediately denied. If they have paid a deposit or any fees, they are typically kept by the university as a penalty for fraud.

What I have also seen is that once universities detect fraud with a particular agency, location, and sometimes even country, they stop admitting students from those sources. It is simply a risk they are not willing to take. So, keep in mind that the possible fraud of one person has the potential to impact not only the one family, but friends and relatives who might apply, and the reputation of the country.

Provide clear, easily readable documentation, translated into English if possible. Ask your bank to write a letter accompanying your statements (some institutions require this) that confirms that you have the necessary amount available at a given conversion rate. Make sure your statement is up to date.

Student Work

International students often have questions about working in the U.S. while on a visa. There is also a lot of mythology about what is possible. With just a few exceptions, students on an F-1 visa are not allowed to work outside of campus. Students can sometimes apply for a financial hardship exception, but typically only after they have been enrolled for a year, and only if they can prove that economic conditions in their home country have deteriorated significantly during that time. There is also a cost for applying, so this is not an easy option.

Students are also sometimes able to use their Curricular Practical Training (CPT) to work off campus. But, again, there are significant caveats. It is typically only permissible after the first year, has to be directly related to your course of study, and may impact how long you are eligible to work after you complete your study.

For most students, the best option is to work on campus. Campus jobs not only provide additional income, but they can be a great opportunity to build your work experience, improve your resume, and meet people. Being able to say you not only studied, but actually worked in another culture can be a strong advantage for you with future employers.

Most universities have an officer with staff members who manage student work opportunities. Domestic students sometimes qualified for Federal Work Study, which are work opportunities that students receive based on their need, and for which the national government provides some of the funding. Institutional work study on the other hand is typically open to all students, including international students.

Universities differ in how they run their programs. Often, it falls to the student to search on the list of posted jobs and contact the office that is hiring, but sometimes this list is also available at the student employment office. You may need a resume to provide to the hiring department. You may also have to interview for the position. Once accepted, the employment office can provide you with a hiring letter. You can then take this offer letter to a local government office, often a Department of Motor Vehicles, in order to be assigned a social security number.

The social security number, or SSN, is a key to open many doors, not only for employment, but for some types of purchases, building credit, and many different types of identification. Guard your social security number very carefully, as anyone who has it has the potential to open accounts in your name or take other actions that may harm you financially.

Student Work Myths

Students often have misconceptions about work opportunities, so allow me address some of them.

Jobs are guaranteed

If someone tells you will have a guaranteed job on campus, be very skeptical unless you complete paperwork for it before you arrive. Campus jobs are often competitive, with more students desiring one than universities can provide. Universities must develop fair processes for advertising and filling these positions, so it is difficult for them to give you any type of preference. It is best to view a student job as a bonus that makes it easier for you to have living expenses, rather than factoring it into your cost to attend.

Reach out early to get information about jobs and follow the process diligently. Ask around with faculty and staff to uncover offices that may be hiring or considering hiring.

Hours are guaranteed

Students often see that legally they are allowed to work up to 20 hours per week and immediately start calculating their total amount for the year, but 20 hours is not standard at all universities, it is just the maximum allowable limit. Universities may have different policies that limit the number of hours you can work or the amount of jobs you can have based on their budgets. Ask first and do not assume. Again, there is typically more demand than supply, so institutions often try to spread the hours across more students. Also keep in mind that working more than the maximum allowable hours is a violation of your visa and could cause it to be terminated without notice, so do not take that risk.

You can make enough working to pay your way

Sometimes agencies, third parties, or even some representatives will give out large numbers of what students can earn during a whole year to make the cost seems smaller. They may say, “Look you can work 20 hours per week during the year and 40 hours during the winter and summer breaks and make X.” Please consider this only a very lucky scenario. It will typically take you a few weeks on campus to identify a job and complete the proper paperwork, so you would not start earning right away. Again, your hours may be limited.

During the summer and winter, there are very few students on campus, so universities need only limited help, which means there are a smaller amount of positions for students, and not all are 40

hours. You also may have additional living expenses. I always counsel students not to plan to pay for their college based on work. If you do not have the resources to pay for your education without work funding, you should keep researching for more options. It is very sad to see a student spend one or two years at a university before they realize they cannot really afford it and have to return home.

If you do want to work over summer and winter breaks, start early cultivating relationships with those departments which do most of the hiring. Facilities and grounds, the dining hall, admissions, and campus recreation are often the best places to start.

Working off campus is really okay

Honestly, this is the myth that concerns me most. Some students in their home countries hear stories about students who come to the United States to study, but through family or cultural community connections find illegal, off-campus work opportunities. Perhaps in their home countries, an infraction like this would not be treated that seriously, but in the U.S. it will be. A student caught working off campus illegally would likely have their visa terminated and be sent home. Because of the violation, they would potentially never be able to get another visa for the U.S.

Even worse, I have heard several students who get themselves into very bad situations in off-campus work. Because they are students, employers take advantage of them, paying them poorly and give them bad working conditions. If the student complains, the illegal employer could threaten to report them and have them sent home. Do not put yourself in this situation. Stay with your legal options.

Health Insurance

This might seem like a strange section to talk about purchasing health insurance, but it could be one of the most important financial decisions you make concerning studying in the United States. The U.S. healthcare system is one of the best in the world. People come to the U.S. from many countries seeking advanced medical care. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most expensive systems in the world.

Many students are used to systems where many healthcare costs are covered by the government. These students are often very surprised by the complexity and expense of simple medical procedures and tests in the U.S. If you are not properly insured, a simple trip to the emergency room could find you owing thousands of dollars in medical bills.

Students are sometimes tempted to purchase inexpensive policies from home, or to rely on policies that come with credits cards. These policies, while inexpensive, often do not have sufficient coverage, and one issue could far outweigh any potential savings.

Think about it, the chances are you are going to be sick or have an injury sometime in the multiple years you are likely to be studying internationally. Is it really worth risking accumulating a debt it could take you years to pay off?

I usually recommend utilizing the insurance policy that your university offers. While the choice is yours, and you should examine your options, typically these policies have been well researched by the university to make sure that they have sufficient coverage at a

reasonable price. While they may seem more expensive, in the long run, they could be one of the best investments that you make.

The Goal

To make yourself a strong candidate, you want to demonstrate that you understand that you are making a very important investment and that you are prepared and able to do so. The goal here is to show that you are conscientious about finances. The university will want to see that you understand your financial obligation and have thought about how you will support yourself. You are a risk for them if they perceive that you only have enough financing for the first year, and that after that you will be asking them for more money or trying to transfer somewhere to get a better deal. These are “deal-breakers” for most institutions. Institutions are also trying to avoid student who pay late or always have to be pushed to pay their bills, so reassuring that this will be done on time can also be an advantage.

Just as I mentioned in the section of retention communication, one of the best messages you can send on the financial question is that your family understands the expenses and has a plan to support you through to graduation. If you can help the university see you as a very low financial risk, you will stand out as a very attractive applicant.

Takeaways:

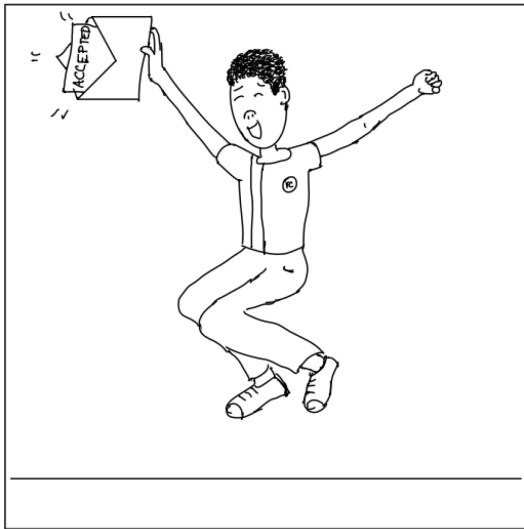
- ◆ Many people in U.S. higher education believe that only wealthy students study in the U.S., so there is not much need for financial support.

Make a Great Impression by Your Approach to Finances

- ◆ Student's options for financing are limited to scholarships and limited work study opportunities.
- ◆ Be sure that you understand what the institution's Certificate of Finance document is asking and how it may differ from what you actually pay to the university.
- ◆ Accurate and up-to-date bank statements are critical in whether a student will receive an I-20 form to seek a visa. Universities are very sensitive to attempts at fraud, as they are responsible to the national government.
- ◆ There are many myths about work opportunities while you are a student. Make sure you get accurate information about what to expect and do not take risks by going outside of the policies.
- ◆ Follow the university's guidelines on health insurance. Having adequate coverage is critical and lacking it can put you in a financial mess.
- ◆ The goal is to reassure the university that you are a low financial risk.

Chapter 9

GRADUATE PROGRAMS





Advice from the Expert

“Last week I was talking to one of my advisees who a few years ago applied for a graduate program in political science at a prestigious university in Washington, DC. He said “the process of writing that statement of purpose changed my life. I had never before questioned myself so deeply looking into my reasons for continuing studying. Finding and clarifying a professional purpose changed my life.”

Every time one faces a major life decision such as starting college, applying for grad school, accepting a new job, choosing a life partner, moving to a new city, etc. We tend to ask people around us for advice. And although this is a good practice in general, many times we end up more lost than in the beginning. I think one of the most important tasks we have on this earth is to get to know ourselves. This is a major life task that takes years of practice, trial and error, but in my experience we keep coming back to it every time we are at a crossroads in our lives.

What do I want? What is my professional purpose? Who do I want to serve? To what question do I want to be the answer to professionally? Based on my life experiences and training, who am I better prepared to serve? What impact do I want to make? Once you have clarity on these questions, the application process won't seem as intimidating. Your statement of purpose will

come along, your interviews will flow, admission counselors and committees will easily see whether or not you fit into their classes, and funding sources (governments, universities and foundations) will have a better idea on how well invested their resources will be if they choose you as a recipient of their scholarships.

There are many variables that are not in your control when applying to U.S. universities such as other competitive applicants applying to the same colleges as you are, institutional priorities, funding availability, etc. However, your job is to showcase through your application materials (essays, test scores, transcripts, letters, interviews) the most accurate picture of you to the colleges that are looking for a student like you, and you won't be able to do this if you do not have a clear picture of yourself first.”

Juan Manuel Molina

EducationUSA Advisor

Chiapas and Tabasco, Mexico

Many international students choose to study in the United States for graduate school instead of undergraduate. For some, this is because the time and financial commitment of a graduate degree is less. Other students want their most advanced degree to be the most impressive or marketable, and still others hope to work for U.S. companies after they complete their studies.

With graduate admissions, there is a higher expectation for students that they will be able to navigate the application process with little guidance, and that students will be able to present themselves with a high degree of professionalism. Often the required English level will also be higher, as students are expected to be more active participants in their education.

Graduate Programs

The graduate experience is typically much more independent, and many of the support services that are made available for undergraduate students do not extend to “grad” students. At the same time, some universities that have large graduate student populations do provide an array of services, like married student housing, access to transportation, and meal plans.

Students studying at the graduate level usually know very specifically what they will study and base their search on particular majors. You may choose your program on particular specialties offered, or even specific faculty members and their areas of research. Rankings lists are a little more accurate at the graduate level because they are comparing similar types of programs with similar outcomes, but they are still not an exact measure of quality.

Graduate students also sometimes have more access to funding sources because of graduate assistantships or teaching fellowships. The department with which you are studying can sometimes be a resource to help you identify finding sources.

Graduate schools still want many of the same characteristics in the students they choose. They look for “runway,” or the potential they see in a student to go on to do great things. They still want to make sure that your pathway has made sense, and that you have a consistent commitment to your area of study. They look for students who can think and manage at a higher level and who want to wrestle with ideas. They are very interested in a sense of loyalty – meaning they want you to know something about the school’s program and why it is different than others, and what you will contribute to it.

Graduate admissions staff are likely to look for which students will fit with the program and who will contribute unique

perspectives to the program. In most undergraduate admissions processes, decisions are made by professional admissions staff, but at the graduate level, there is more likely to be some amount of faculty in the process. Faculty take a much more active role in shaping the program and often have much more direct influence over who is admitted.

I have asked a few experts in the graduate admission field for their tips and suggestions for how students should think about the experience of studying in the U.S. as graduate students.

The Application Process

Joanne Legler

Senior Director of Learning Partnerships

Executive Education

Yale School of Management

Considering graduate school as the next step in your educational journey can be both thrilling and intimidating. The excitement of going “back to school” is often tempered by concerns about studying and living away from home, perhaps for the first time, perhaps in a language that’s not your native language, or you’re thinking about the prospects of employment post-graduation.

The good news: international students bring a wealth of diverse and interesting perspectives that can be enormously valuable to your fellow classmates and faculty and add a critical voice in the classroom discussions. Additionally, schools are fortunate to count among their alumni graduates living and working all over the world, enriching the experience of all graduates and current students.

But before you get there, we understand that even just applying to graduate school, particularly in the US, can be daunting. Assuming you have done the work to thoroughly research programs and schools, here are some things to keep in mind when you're at the point of applying to U.S. programs.

Big Picture

What is your “why”? Most application essay questions or personal statements will ask you to discuss your interest in your area of study, your interest in specific programs, and your goals. This can feel a little uncomfortable at first, but being honest and sincere will make this task much easier. Be prepared to underscore these notes in an interview so that your story is consistent throughout the process.

English Language

Professors at graduate programs teach and talk fast. In addition, the expectation to keep up with reading, deliverables and class discussions is high. Be confident that your language skills will allow you to keep up, and that you can speak confidently when called on in class.

Part of your preparation for an application may include English classes or groups that allow you to practice your skills, especially in preparation for an exam such as the TOEFL (where required; not all schools need this, especially if a video question and/or interview is part of the process).

Cost Considerations

The cost of graduate school in the US can be enormous, particularly if you're not considering programs that offer aid, such as teaching or research assistantships or generous scholarships (business schools can be counted among that group). In addition, the US has strict requirements for incoming students to show proof of finances prior to enrollment or when applying for visas or loans. Lastly, many schools are unable to provide loans that fully fund your time in the US (including not just tuition, but food, an apartment or dorm room and travel expenses). Therefore, you should expect to arrive in the US with plenty of funding for your real life – not just your studies.

Admissions Materials and Requirements

Most applications will require the upload of an unofficial transcript from your prior studies. If you are admitted and enroll, you may be required to submit a physical or digital copy, which is designated as an official copy. Take the time to dig out your own copy now, and, if yours is missing or you never received one, to understand how to procure these documents from your prior institutions. This can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few weeks; plan accordingly.

Exams

Review the requirements for entrance exams (such as the GRE, LSAT or GMAT). Preparing for and performing well on these exams can give the admissions team one of many pieces of information to help determine your ability to succeed in a graduate program. Going into an exam “cold” or otherwise ill-prepared can result in a score that doesn't reflect your abilities.

Visas

The visa process is one where you can do everything right, and still have an uphill battle ahead. As part of your research, become familiar with things like visa interviews and timelines in your home country. Once you are admitted to a program, follow all instruction from the Office of International Students to ensure you have met each requirement to obtain your student visa and can legally enter – and stay in - the US for the duration of your studies. Be sure your passport is valid and up to date!

Career Goals

If your goal is to find employment within the US or in another country outside of your home country, be thoughtful and realistic about your plans. While your Career Services staff will support your search as best they can, there are factors outside of your preparation that can influence how successful any one soon-to-be-graduate is in the job search. Take advantage of every opportunity to explore services provided, network with alumni and think through multiple plans and courses of action. This process can be time-consuming while in the midst of a rigorous academic program, so find good ways to manage your time so that job searching doesn't take over. On that note...

Enjoy

If you're fortunate enough to secure a spot in the program you love, you will find so much joy in small moments, like connecting with your classmates outside of school, or exploring your new campus. Get plenty of sleep, but try to say "yes" to these moments of connection and exploration when your schedule allows. Two or three years will go by quickly and you'll be lining up for

commencement, lamenting the things you never got to do. Work hard, but have fun while you're at it."

Advice from the Expert

"Studying at the graduate level can be an incredible experience.

There are so many potential graduate students who never "bite the bullet" (take a risk) and therefore miss a distinct opportunity to not only better position themselves professionally, but to also have the chance to enrich their educational experience and lives in ways they could not even muster. Upon graduation with a bachelor's degree, the majority of college graduates become involved in attaining employment, climbing the corporate ladder, finding significant others, marriage and building a family.

These are all noble ambitions, but for most they also pose the key reason behind never venturing forward educationally and attaining a graduate degree. Not only do most feel it is unattainable in a world fraught with distractions, new and growing responsibilities, and increased educational costs, but many also feel they are not ready for the experience, and are afraid to fail.

I found myself in the same predicament years ago as I considered graduate school – enough to even pose the question to my future faculty advisor, "Do I have what it takes to succeed in this program?" To which his response to me was, "if these (expletive) can do it, you surely can!". That is all I needed, but I was lucky to have found such strong support, and therefore found myself entering my new adventure.

What most do not understand is that graduate school is not just taking more courses in order to achieve higher degrees, but it is an exercise in developing deeper, richer and more meaningful relationships with faculty and fellow students that last a lifetime. Of course, one learns so much more in the area of

specialization chosen, but that knowledge is complimented with a collegial mentality and culture not found in the undergraduate experience.

The relationship between faculty and student is far more balanced, feeling more like a peer experience going well beyond mentor/mentee. Classmates become a major lifeline of support, success and eventually a key network to life after grad school. The overall endeavor becomes so much more than just a degree – and instead takes on a far deeper experience that forms each individual into the professional, leader and citizen they will continue to evolve into during and beyond graduate school.

Institutions vary a great deal in the way they work with students.

The graduate school experience will obviously vary from institution to institution, and from institution-type to institution-type (selective/ not selective). Generally speaking, the more selective institutional experience will certainly be more collegial than that at the undergraduate level – but it will still be set against a hierarchical culture formerly experienced at the undergraduate level. In addition, the graduate experience at these schools will be much more heavily centered on research, and less so on peer-to-peer engagement.

For the most part – students attending these programs will receive a far more theoretically-based education. On the other hand, those attending less-selective institutions will generally engage more so as peers with their faculty and classmates. The education will be more equally balanced between theoretical and experiential, and depending on the program will not lean as heavily on research. One may be able to more effectively tie together day-to-day work experience with what they are learning in the classroom – as more-often-than-not those engaging in the graduate programs are likely also employed full time.

The graduate market has grown in volume and complexity.

As we see the continued decline in the number of undergraduate students entering higher education, we are inversely seeing an increased interest/enrollment in graduate programs. With this said these students are not the same graduate students as in former decades. First of all, the vast majority are going on to graduate school to further advance in their careers – meaning they are going back to school after having started their professional careers. In addition, they seek greater flexibility.

The predominant growth in graduate enrollment is coming from those choosing to take their graduate courses online and/or hybrid. Due to jobs, family, etc., the need for attaining their graduate degree on ‘their terms’ requires the ability to do so from home, online and in an asynchronous environment. So, as we see more prospective graduate students choosing to enroll, the type of student and the modality for which they choose to take their classes is far different and more complex than ever before....in many cases stretching the capabilities of a majority of institutions who were late to the party in investing in high quality online/hybrid graduate programs.

The “complexity” of these students not only exists once they enroll, but also when they are considering where to enroll. Institutions need to understand that their program development, marketing and recruitment efforts need to “meet the market where it is” rather than vice versa – which is what higher education has done for the majority of its existence. It is a “buyers’ market” – one that sees higher education, and graduate degrees, as a commodity. The institutions that more effectively convey their value proposition and connect it to the student’s needs, expectations and desired outcomes are the ones that will succeed.

Student characteristics

One of the most important characteristics in students is their ability to fund their education, but in all reality there are several important factors that grad schools seek in their students/future students:

- ◆ ***Commitment*** – graduate programs expect that students enter with a serious intent to persist and at times sacrifice their time and energy to ensure that the efforts put forth toward the program are more than enough to succeed. This is key especially when entering a program that heavily leans on peer-to-peer engagement, group projects and a healthy dose of faculty/ student interaction.
- ◆ ***Team Mentality*** – most graduate programs require a team mentality from its students. Many of the projects and even final tests/papers/exercises are done as a group. This means that each person needs to be ready to participate and contribute to not only their success – but of those around them too.
- ◆ ***Active participants*** – a large majority of programs require/encourage active participation in class discussion(s). It is almost impossible to hide in a grad class, and the expectation is that students are ready to engage, not be a wall flower in the back of the room (real or virtual).
- ◆ ***Proven success*** – In more selective programs, students are expected to have had strong academic success, and even better if enhanced with documented successes in a myriad of different academic (i.e. faculty assistant, research assistant, etc.) and leadership-type experiences. This does not mean that less-selective institutions are not as interested in the same, but these schools will consider a student based on a more holistic assessment of their academic and professional experiences.

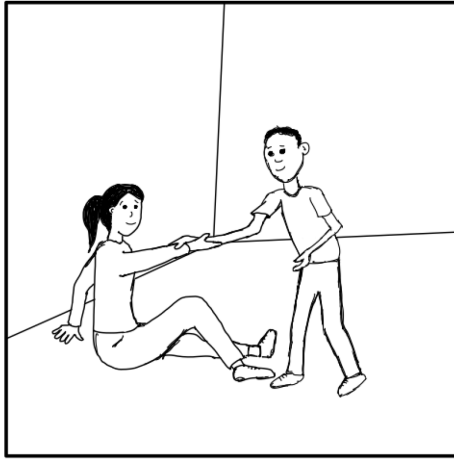
Charles A. Ramos

Vice President

Ruffalo Noel-Levitz

Chapter 10

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR EXPERIENCE





Advice from the Expert

“In Uruguay (and in most countries of Latin America) high school students are not encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities besides English classes or maybe playing sports. It is not in our culture as it is in the US. This is why my best advice goes to those amazing students who are in 9th and 10th grade and are considering studying in the US: get involved in activities within your community, actively seek for NGOs or volunteering groups that share your passions and interests so you can build up your academic and personal profile with enough time.

That is, from my perspective, one important piece of advice for international high school students. I am putting together a list of extracurricular activities to help our students because believe it or not, sometimes the most common question in our sessions is: What do you mean with extracurricular activities? Where can I participate? Especially students from public schools that might not have the same extracurricular options that some private institutions offer.”

Studying in the United States will offer you an amazing array of opportunities, academically, socially, and culturally. Unlike higher education in many countries, a U.S. university experience is one that integrates all areas of a student’s life – career, social life, athletic or recreational experiences, living experiences, and personal growth.

If you engage with your experience and are open to exploring the options open to you, you will find you receive much more from it than just an education. You are likely to have a life transformation.

Lic. Scarlet Fernández

Adviser

EducationUSA Uruguay

Frequently Asked Question

Why do I have to take classes that are not in my major?

One of the biggest surprises that many international students find upon arriving at a U.S. college is that their academic schedules are partially filled with courses outside their major. This is particularly surprising for students who come from systems where they have spent the last few years specializing in their studies. A computer science major who finds himself taking courses in history, psychology, or communications may feel like he is moving backwards.

Most four-year institutions have what is called a “general education” requirement. This is a core of courses that all of their students take. Usually, this general education is built around what is called a “distribution requirement.” This means that students are required to take a certain number of courses in different areas, but they often have the choice of which exact class. For example, you might be required to take two courses in social sciences, but you may be able to choose whether those courses are from areas like psychology, sociology, history, or other areas.

Why is this required? As you know, higher education in the United States is respected worldwide for the way it prepares

students, and one of the primary differentiators of the American system is its liberal arts basis. This means that universities are not focused only on preparing students for getting a first job, but on preparing them for careers in leadership. The easiest way to think about liberal arts education is to think of it as leadership training.

In the 1700's and 1800's, when most of the colleges in the United States began, many were founded in rural areas. They were started because these areas needed leaders. It was these colleges that produced the doctors, lawyers, and religious leaders that would serve these areas. Because of this dynamic, much of American higher education became focused on teaching students to lead people. This meant a focus on strong communication skills, the ability to influence people, management and leadership development. Over time, institutions have added more technical and career-oriented programs, but this sense of leadership development remains at the heart of much of American higher education, and is part of what makes it so special.

So, if you arrive on campus and find that you have classes in areas that you did not anticipate, do not panic, and do not feel like someone has made a mistake. Consider these classes as an opportunity to develop your leadership skill and enjoy them! They will help you build your people skills and prepare you to be a more senior professional.

Advice from the Expert

Kelly Berigan

Engineering International Programs Coordinator Iowa State University

“There are many resources outside the classroom that are available to all enrolled students at a US college or university. Here are some examples:

***Academic Support Services** - such as tutoring, group studying (supplemental instruction), and writing support. Professors have office hours that allow students to come ask questions and gain clarity about topics learned in class. In some cultures, faculty members can be unapproachable, whereas many international students are pleasantly surprised how easy it is to interact with professors on U.S. campuses outside the classroom during office hours.*

Student Clubs and Organizations

Many U.S. schools can have hundreds of student clubs that range from academic clubs to personal interest clubs. These clubs allow students to socially interact with other students that have common interests. Many students find clubs as a way to pursue a personal interest and build a social community. (At my university there are over 900 student clubs available to all students. Examples include, the Car Club, Badminton Club, Pokémon club, Knitting Club, Society of International Engineers, 3D Printing & Design Club, etc.).

Career Services

These offices help with things such as resume review and interviewing skills. Employers advertise job openings through these offices. It is highly recommended to interact with this office throughout one's academic career. There are often career fairs or company spotlights that occur each semester. The services offered by offices that focus on career development are typically available for alumni to even use after graduation.

Food

International students are often surprised with how much free food is available throughout the semester. It is common to serve free or low-cost food such as pizza and ice cream during events that are held on campus. Offering free food typically increases attendance at events which is typically desired by the campus group or office hosting the event.

During exam week at my university there is a free pancake breakfast in the middle of the night for students who are up studying. The midnight pancake breakfast is a way for students to have a break from studying and fill their stomachs so they can continue studying throughout the night. Additionally, when companies come to campus to showcase their business to students they sometimes serve food. Students often create group chats with friends to inform each other where they see free or cheap food being handed out on campus. Make sure to take advantage of on-campus events because not only will you learn from the event, you will also have a full stomach.”

There are so many fun events that are part of campus life. In fact, one of the important lessons that many international students learn after spending some time on campus is that joining student clubs is, in many ways, the key to social life at U.S. universities. This is different than in many countries, but in the U.S., student clubs are where students meet and get to know others with similar interests. Joining and participating actively in clubs is one of the fastest ways to connect with campus and to begin feeling at home. You will typically find that clubs will give new students a warm welcome, and you may suddenly find yourself with 15-20 new friends.

You May Feel Lonely, But You Are Not Alone

The life of an international student is not always easy. It is inevitable that you will have times when you feel lonely, homesick, or sad. It is not easy to make such a big transition and to be so far from home. This is normal, especially after

the first initial excitement calms down and you begin to settle into the day-to-day. This feeling was part of my experience living abroad, and has been part of the experience of almost every student I have spoken with, but they have also universally told me that the benefits of the experience far outweigh this challenge.

For students who feel lonely, I always try to remind them:

You are not alone!

First, thought you might not realize it, most of the U.S. students around you also feel lonely, homesick, or sad at some point. Reach out to them and you will often find that your experiences are not that different. In fact, reaching out this way often ends with you getting to know the families of your friends and being welcomed by them.

There are dozens of people on campus who want you to succeed and who will help you if you have the courage to reach out. Universities have built in systems of support – advising, counseling, mentoring, tutoring, residence life, and more – that is just waiting for you to use it. But no one will know you need it unless you speak out.

You are part of an incredibly tradition! There are people all over the world who have experience the kinds of things that you have. By studying internationally, you have gained entry into one of the coolest clubs on the planet, and people who have shared this life-changing experience are likely eager to support you, mentor you, and cheer you on.

Advice from The Expert

Maria Paula Caro

International Student, Colombia

“I have discovered the best version of myself, I found my friends for life, and I have grown as a person and as an athlete. However, I have been through some

challenges; I have felt frustrated for not getting good outcomes, I have felt insecure speaking in English, and I have felt alone. But, I would say that all those moments that I have lived so far have built the person who I am right now.

It's hard to be far from home and not being able to celebrate some successes with my family but they have always been present no matter how far we are. Definitely, it is a sacrifice but it's so worth it.

It is important to have good management of time, prioritize what is important, have fun but be responsible, live every moment that you can. Don't be ashamed if your English is not the best one at the beginning. Guess what? You are bilingual! And it will get better with more practice.

Being in college in the U.S. offers a lot of incredible opportunities, not just academics, but also lets you have a better future and prepares you for what is coming next. Take advantage of every single moment that you have and remember that is fine to feel frustrated or sad, but keep your head up!"

It is okay if you sometimes feel lonely, that is part of being an adventurous person, who is willing to do what others are too nervous to do. But you do not have to worry about being alone, you are in great company, and through this experience you are likely to find yourself as well.

Takeaways:

- ◆ U.S. universities offer incredible social experiences as part of campus life. They provide students with a holistic and immersive experience.
- ◆ Student clubs are a key resource for helping you to connect with other students and make friends.
- ◆ Almost all international students experience some loneliness or cultural shock at some point, but they do

not have to feel alone, as there are many ways to connect with others.

- ◆ Students are often surprised that they are asked to broaden their academic experience by taking courses outside of their majors, but this actually gives them much more value.

Chapter 11

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: ONE STUDENT'S SUCCESS STORY





Advice from the Expert

Melisa Borden

Director of International Admission

Study abroad: Salisbury University. ELI student and M.A. in Conflict Resolution

“When I first arrived in the United States on a red-eye flight, I never imagined how my life would change completely. I am Colombian, from the capital city, Bogota, and left to study English at Salisbury University, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Despite Salisbury being a beautiful college town and having an excellent university, what I missed the most was the "noise," the excitement and activity of my city. It was very quiet! Something was missing!

That made me think, how can I bring the world to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and bring my University to the world. With little knowledge or experience (and little English), I took the first steps that would lead to my career. I wanted to get my culture's sound and happiness through the international student perspective. During my eleven years of experience as an international educator, I have seen many students making career decisions that change

their lives forever, as happened to me. Bring your culture, experiences, and personality to everything you do when studying abroad.

Navigating a new environment... Learning a new language... Trying to develop new skills... It's hard to know where to start. Many times, I didn't know how to get where I wanted to go, or even where I wanted to go in my education and career. Since day one, though, I knew I needed to be involved and get to work. My future would depend on my initiative. In my first job interview, I only understood a little about the project I would work on, but they liked my attitude.

Was I prepared for my first working experience in the USA? At the time, it didn't feel like it. But I was motivated and ready to give my best. I started recruiting and advising Latin American students in the USA in a program called "Bienvenidos." That was my first job in the USA. I started to go to local fairs, talk to students, and motivate them to visit the campus. After that, I got involved with summer camps exclusively for international students. I loved it! It's overwhelming at first, but take initiative and bring your best, one step at a time.

Over time, I started to learn about international student services, immigration regulations, and admissions. In the blink of an eye, my time as an English Language Institute (ELI) student was over. It was fun, and it was always my plan to return home after the six-month English course. I had a job and a life back home, I told myself. I left to improve my English, have an adventure, and then go back home. But what if I stayed? I loved the college environment, and I loved to work with young people and help them to build a career.

What to do next, then? I already had a bachelor's degree in business from my studies in Colombia, so maybe a second bachelor's degree? As an ELI student, I became close with my school's Designated School Official (DSO). I went to my DSO and told her I wanted to stay but didn't know what to do next to make it happen. She said I always needed to go higher in education. "You already have a bachelor's degree. Consider getting a master's degree," she said. She gave me a couple of options since she noticed I loved to help students and work in the college atmosphere. She asked me the "big question". What do you love to do, and how do you see yourself?

For many international students, this is the first time they've had the choice to pursue whatever they want. Choices in many cultures are still somewhat aligned with family expectations, but they should be more aligned with what your talents are and what you want out of life. In my case, I needed to shift my whole career path to do what I was passionate about. That's a huge life decision to make! Get to know everyone in your global office. Introduce yourself, volunteer, and ask their advice when you are stuck. They may have been in the same situation you are, or may have experience helping other students overcome these challenges.

I was very nervous! I had experience working for big multinational companies like Mercedes-Benz and DirecTV in the supply chain arena. At the time, I thought the most reasonable thing would be to pursue a master's in business administration (MBA). Still, during my six months working directly with education and young people, I knew an MBA wasn't the best fit. My DSO talked to me about the master's in conflict resolution. She said it had some counseling and international relations components, and she found

me an appointment with the program director. I liked it, and I was ready to apply! Work experience and studying reveal over time what you don't like to do, what you are good at, and what you love to do. It's okay to change your path if it moves you closer to your talents and what you are passionate about.

For some international students, choosing a career they find attractive is a new concept. Many come from cultures where their parents or elders have predetermined their careers. However, they may develop new career goals when they come to the United States and begin exploring new interests and taking courses in different disciplines. After making this significant change, the next big question came up. How am I going to pay for this? Here is my advice as an international student and educator. Don't be afraid to apply to an American university. Concentrate on building your profile and being a good student, and the rest will come. Again, being involved and showing your skills is essential. Take initiative, find an on-campus job, a suitable internship, and projects to volunteer on and build your experience. Whatever you do, be the best you can be.

Remember how I was working while I was studying English? I told my employer that I would love to pursue a master's degree here. I asked, "Can you change my student worker contract to a graduate assistantship?" A graduate assistantship is a term that many American universities use. They pay part of your tuition for graduate school, and you work part-time for the University. How great is that? How did I find out about this amazing program? Again, be close to your international services office and make connections around campus from day one. The people around you

can help give you the knowledge and tools to succeed. You need to work hard, but you don't have to solve every problem alone!

I enjoyed learning from distinguished faculty for two years and had fun writing and reading. It can get stressful sometimes, but I remember this time of my life with a big smile. I was a student again, and I love to study. I worked twenty hours weekly helping and advising students from different backgrounds and cultures and spent my summers working with students worldwide. As a graduate student, I drafted and presented a proposal to bring Latin American students to the University. I wanted to get my people to campus.

The international office listened to my proposal and even allowed me to intern with them! I couldn't believe they were interested! Don't be afraid to speak up and share your ideas with your peers and the international student services staff. They won't all be good and maybe not every idea will get recognized, but it only takes one to open doors to new opportunities.

Then the day finally came... It was time for graduation! At that time, I already had half of my life here and didn't want to return home. I had discovered my career path, and I just wanted to stay.

A second master's degree, then? Get a PHD? Or what about OPT? What's OPT, you may ask? Optional Practical Training is temporary employment directly related to an F-1 international student's primary study area. Eligible students can apply for up to 12 months of OPT employment authorization before completing their academic studies. And it turns out that I was eligible for OPT! I was legally able to work for any company in the United States. How great is that?

It would be challenging to land a job in the United States upon graduation, but my strong work ethic and the skills I was working on would pay off. I started applying everywhere and got a couple of interviews—one at the local chicken company. I dressed up and brought my newly updated resume and...It was probably one of the worst interviews I ever had. Take your time applying for jobs. Interviewing and job hunting is a skill and like all skills they take time and practice. The ability to network and show perseverance will eventually lead to a job; sometimes, you are blind to opportunities that are right in front of you.

It turns out that my dream job was right in front of me the whole time. My internship led to a job offer upon graduation, which then got me started in my career in international education. You should always ask yourself, “How will this degree or internship allow you to stay in the United States afterward or anywhere you want to be?” I cannot stress enough how important it is to get started on this process early and what you need to do to prepare for the job market. That includes building a network, taking internship opportunities, and connecting with staff and professors. The students who hold off on these steps until the last minute are usually the ones who end up failing to be successful in finding a job here in the United States after graduating. Don’t wait until graduation to build your network and develop your skills through work experience.

I was thrilled and grateful to be working in college admissions through the OPT program. I split my time between reading applications for the admissions office and the International Students Services office, meanwhile learning more and more about how the immigration process works. It was awesome! I wanted to

put my internship plan into action and I took my first trips to Colombia and Peru to recruit students from Latin America. During my time as an international recruiter at my alma mater, we were very successful in recruiting Latin American students and giving them opportunities to study in America that they would not have had otherwise.

After my OPT, the University sponsored me for an H1B visa, and I worked for many years as the International Student Coordinator. I did admissions and student services. Based on my experience, I developed many programs to serve international students better, helping them learn and build career paths.

I am telling you the good and fun parts of my story here. It was not always easy, and it was not me being just lucky. It would be best if you worked hard to navigate the system and immigration. You may have multiple types of visas until you become a permanent resident or a citizen. You must be brave!

Many international students arrive in the United States with unrealistic expectations about work opportunities. They often need to pay more attention to how long the job search process takes and the importance of completing internships. You must build your skills and be a hard worker. Waiting times to process documents are lengthy. Sometimes, as it happened to me, the government requests more evidence to justify why they are giving you the job as a foreigner and not giving the job to an American citizen.

Always remember that you have something that companies and organizations want. Just because you have studied and lived in a different country makes you a global citizen. And that is a big plus! Dealing with other people and cultures is very important in the corporate world, where you are constantly in contact with people

around the globe conducting business. Organizations like and want diverse employees, so feel free to apply and show your potential! You have made it so far, and you can go further! Feel free to knock on doors and ask for help. You may find a big YES that will change your life forever.

Takeaways:

- ◆ Bring your culture, experiences, and personality to everything you do when studying abroad.
- ◆ It's overwhelming at first, but take initiative and bring your best, one step at a time.
- ◆ Get to know everyone in your global office. Introduce yourself, volunteer, and ask their advice when you are stuck. They may have been in the same situation you are, or may have experience helping other students overcome these challenges.
- ◆ Work experience and studying reveal over time what you don't like to do, what you are good at, and what you love to do. It's okay to change your path if it moves you closer to your talents and what you are passionate about.
- ◆ The people around you can help give you the knowledge and tools to succeed. You need to work hard, but you don't have to solve every problem alone!
- ◆ Don't be afraid to speak up and share your ideas with your peers and the international student services staff. They won't all be good and maybe not every idea will get recognized, but it only takes one to open doors to new opportunities.

- ◆ Take your time applying for jobs. Interviewing and job hunting is a skill and like all skills they take time and practice. The ability to network and show perseverance will eventually lead to a job; sometimes, you are blind to opportunities that are right in front of you.
- ◆ Don't wait until graduation to build your network and develop your skills through work experience.

Here are some tips for international students looking to work in the USA. This advice applies to CPT, OPT, H1B jobs, and internships.

- ◆ Deadlines and due dates are vital. Time flies when you are studying. For example, if you know that graduation day is approaching, apply to OPT early, and once a start date is determined, begin applying for jobs approximately two months before that date. The recruitment and selection process takes time. Adjust your timeline for sectors with early hiring cycles or longer hiring cycles such as academia. No matter when you decide to send your application, it's never too early to begin networking! It can often result in job leads and help you determine your job search strategy for when to start applying.
- ◆ Some U.S. employers hesitate to hire international students because hiring officials often need help understanding the work authorization process and visa regulations. It would be best to learn the immigration rules first to propose solutions to the hiring managers if this becomes an obstacle. For example, know the regulations and apply within enough time if you are

applying for an H1B visa. The Department of State will reject H-1B petitions received on or after April 1 of every year if you apply to an H1's are subject to a cap. Know the regulation first and plan accordingly.

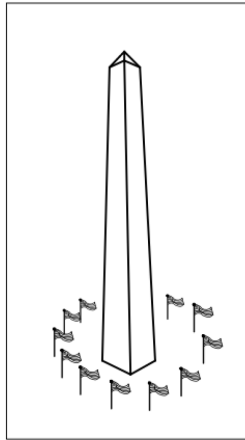
- ◆ Show what makes you different from other candidates by developing as many in-demand skills as possible. Learn how to use the industry standard software tools in and around your field of study. Also, continually build your English skills for reading, writing, and speaking. Conversational and Public speaking skills will prove very valuable when it comes to presentations, teamwork, and progressing in your studies and career. Developing knowledge of American business practices and industry specific and general business principles will go a long way in the private sector and consulting firms.
- ◆ Build your résumé with projects that highlight all of your skills and interests. International students often struggle with language barriers. Communication is more difficult when writing résumés and cover letters or completing job interviews. Start building your resume from day one. Use the resources at your University. Almost every University has a career center office. Those offices are designed to help you build your career and resume. Make an appointment and ask for a professional to look at and give you suggestions for your resume.
- ◆ To succeed, you need to build and maintain you network of mentors and advisors. Professors, university staff, alumni, and fellow students can be a starting point. List everyone in your network who can help you find a job or point you in the right direction, when you're unsure

of the next step to take. Attend professional events and approach people in non-work settings like a church, gym, or community events. Talk to people at the coffee shop! These are opportunities to learn a new culture, possibly practice new language skills, make friends, and build your network. You never know who your next employer can be or will provide you with contact information for different organizations.

- ◆ Target organizations in states with less competition. Great opportunities may lie in secondary and tertiary cities and rural areas, rather than in major metropolitan areas. The cost of living may also be more forgiving than in big metropolitan cities.
- ◆ Don't hesitate to start your own business if you have a great idea. Many international students have started billion-dollar companies. You can be the next one! Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX, and Noubar Afeyan from Moderna Therapeutics are two international students who are making a big difference in the entrepreneurial world.
- ◆ Feel free to apply for jobs in other countries or return home and find a great job. The experience you have gained as an international student will be incomparable with other candidates.
- ◆ Remember to start your career from the day you apply to the University. Make sure you create a strong application. It's your entry card to get a student visa, a job in the United States, etc.!

Chapter 12

TO IMPRESS A UNIVERSITY, THINK LIKE ONE





Studying in another country is one of the richest and most transformative experiences you can have. If this is your dream, it is something that is worth time, effort and sacrifice.

Many of my recommendations and the insights of the experts quoted ask you to think about how the way you present yourself will be perceived by the admissions representatives and other staff members at the universities. That is because the most critical elements of your success, both as an applicant and as a student at a U.S. university, is your ability to see the situation from someone else's point of view.

If you want to impress a U.S. university, you have to begin to think like one. When you understand the values, motivations, and concerns of the institution to which you are applying, you will have the opportunity to demonstrate that you are the candidate that they want. This includes:

Attitudes

As I started this guide, I gave you clues to the kind of mindset that universities are looking for in students attending internationally:

- ◆ A learner's mind
- ◆ A willingness to fully immerse yourself in the experience
- ◆ An openness to learn from all kinds of people
- ◆ A readiness to overcome unexpected challenges

They value these characteristics because they know that students who have them will likely be the most successful in adapting to a new environment. They will blend with the student body, delight professors, and confirm to the campus community that the admissions offices made a good choice.

Understanding

We then talked about the importance of understanding the higher education system in the United States, and studying it so that you can communicate your understanding when applying. This includes:

- ◆ Knowing the difference between the major categories of U.S. institutions
- ◆ Understanding the historical value of the liberal arts and general education
- ◆ Being able to articulate why you desire a U.S. education
- ◆ Reflecting the university's unique identity and values back to it

Universities want students who understand the landscape, as they will be more likely to be successful if they understand the environment they are selecting. They want students who understand the American style of education so they do not have to convince students to follow the systems they have developed. They also want students who recognize what makes each university unique and will come ready to support those values. They want you to want them.

Communication

Universities want candidates who know how to communicate like well-adjusted adults. The last thing they want to do is admit students who will be rude, entitled, or dishonest, and who will embarrass them on campus by not being able to treat other people well. They look for students who:

- ◆ Demonstrate their interest in attending their university specifically
- ◆ Are responsive and know how to build a relationship without overcommunicating
- ◆ Know how to have sensitive conversations about topics like finances
- ◆ Can perceive what others are communicating and respond accordingly.

Students who are perceptive and can communicate well will be able to develop a relationship with the admissions office that can help with a smoother process.

Application

It is your application that tells your story. It is through your application that you are able to paint a picture of yourself and present yourself as a good match. This includes:

- ◆ Helping your readers triangulate by highlighting the features of your application you most want them to remember
- ◆ Providing a clear and consistent view of yourself with lots of proof of what you say, so that admissions staff do not have to guess.
- ◆ Selecting recommenders who know you and can communicate your likelihood of success in a university environment
- ◆ Sharing a vision for the future with your readers that includes your goals and motivations

Universities want to make sure that they are getting what they think they are getting. They want to be reassured that the person they see on paper is who will show up on campus. They will look for inconsistencies in your application, or things that do not make sense, and these can cause them to consider you a high-risk applicant. Think like an admissions committee. Does your application leave any doubts about your motivations, your choice of major, your choice of institution, or your reasons for wanting to come to the United States? If it does, you need to answer these questions to help them feel that they know who you really are.

Essay

Writing an admissions essay can be intimidating, but it can also be your secret weapon for making a good impression. To do so, you need to check these boxes:

- ◆ Pick a less common topic that will teach the reader something about you
- ◆ Demonstrate your command of the English language
- ◆ Show that you know the structures of a well-written essay
- ◆ Use a tone that is a good match for you
- ◆ Indicate that you are a good investment

Essay writing is where it is most important to think like your audience. Imagine that you are a person who has just read 50 essays in a row. What would you hope that number 51 would be like? How would it make you feel? How would it capture your attention? What would make you want to share it with someone else? If you can imagine yourself in the reader's position, you will write more naturally and connect better with the person who you want to impress!

Interview

Colleges want more than just numbers. They want students who can present themselves professionally. The interview, whether in-person or virtual, is your chance to demonstrate that you have potential to make a contribution, both on campus and after your graduation as you go out into the world. The interview is a chance to help the university to see that you are a fit, and that you have the

people skills and the personality to represent the university well in the world. Universities will look for:

- ◆ Students who are prepared to answer common questions they are likely to be asked
- ◆ Students who can ask thoughtful questions themselves
- ◆ Student who are engaging, personable, and can make a human connection

Remember, interviewers want to like you, and they do not expect you to be perfect. If you can bring positive energy, enthusiasm, and sincerity, you will reassure universities that you have a great future if they will choose you.

Language

One of the largest risks that admissions offices take when selecting students is that they will be critiqued by faculty that students are not proficient enough in their mastery of the English language. Because of this, admissions offices often have strict cutoffs with English scores. Your job is to reassure them that you have the ability to benefit from the education and participate fully in the experience.

- ◆ The easiest way to do this is by presenting strong test scores, and I provided study tips to assist you in learning language faster. A more in-depth resources to assist you in gaining language fluency is my book Master Any Language Faster, 2024 Rio Tercero Press.
- ◆ Take charge of your own active learning process for English

- ◆ Provide additional evidence of your ability to thrive in the language

Choosing students who cannot be successful in the classroom because of their English levels is a major risk for universities. Do everything you can to reassure admissions officers that you can overcome this barrier.

Finances

The financial aspects of enrollment for international students is one of the largest challenges. Universities often believe that their greatest risk is enrolling someone who cannot actually afford to come. They are concerned that such students will either not pay or not retain past the initial year because they cannot afford it. You can make yourself an attractive candidate by demonstrating that you understand these concerns.

- ◆ Recognize that universities are businesses, and that many primarily derive their revenue from student payments. Reassure them that you have calculated the cost and will pay on time.
- ◆ Understand that institutions are seeking students who will complete the whole program with them. Indicate that that is your intention.
- ◆ Inform yourself about the realities and limitations of campus work options.
- ◆ Provide clear and trustworthy documentation

If you can employ all of these points, you will give universities confidence that they are making a good investment in choosing you.

To Impress a University, Think Like One

The key in all of these categories is to understand the concerns and the hopes that universities have about admitting international students. Just as you may have a dream of a U.S. education that you hope to fulfill, universities have their own dreams about the students who will make amazing contributions to their campuses and the world. Understand how universities think and how they see you and you can make both of those dreams come true.

COLLEGE ESSAY SAMPLES



College Essay: Fernanda (Angel) from Brazil

I'm going to be in the history books. One way or another. Everyone wants to change the world, but this is why I know I will do it.

Elie Wiesel was a Jew who survived the holocaust, and later won the Nobel Peace Prize of 1986. In his famous speech "perks of indifference", he once said: "Indifference leads the other to an abstraction". I agree with that, but a lot of people apparently don't.

Having in mind that the American system is completely different from what I'm used to from living in Brazil all my life, my first year in the USA was quite a challenge. From competing in debate competitions in a completely different language to trying to understand what is a credit hour or what is "major", it was definitely not what I was expecting. I felt like the numbers were never good enough and that I never had good enough extracurriculars, even though I finished my first semester with a 3.76 grade point average, being in the honors college, captain of debate team, with multiple extracurricular activities and winning the election for student body vice president.

While my journey at (X) University has been great, a small town in the middle of Virginia doesn't have a lot to offer when it comes to internships and other opportunities. Besides having achieved everything that I wanted in simply two semesters, I am driven by the possibility of new achievements and the challenges that come with it, so I have found that this is now the right place for me.

Moving to New York seems scary because it is an enormous change, but to reach my full potential and achieve my biggest goal of going to law school, it is a fear that I am willing to face, and according to Heraclitus "change is the only constant in the world", and we might not be talking about cosmology, but it is still applicable.

So, with that, I want to go to law school. I am hungry for knowledge. My mom always says that when I want something, I can do it no matter what and no one can stop me. In order to change the world, we need power. We need people. And most of all, we need a leader who is seeking real justice. I'm not going to feed all the kids in Africa or find the cure for all diseases because that's nearly impossible. But if I make someone's life better, that's already enough – although, I never aim low. I was made for the bigger cities and for a place like Molloy University, where I can have the comfort of being in a small university, with the perfect class sizes while still having access to big opportunities in the city.

I am going to be in the history books, because I am going to take the biggest opportunities and at least one of them will work out. Because I have potential and I know what I want. Because I will do anything in my reach to achieve my goals. Because law runs my soul and politics make my eyes shine.

I am going to be in the history books, or I will die trying.

College Essay, Smabhav – Nepal

I've always strived for academic excellence and this dedication has resulted in me consistently scoring well in my class. This dedication to excellence has not only shaped my personal development but has also earned me respect from my family and excellent reputation among my peers. My achievements have been possible through multiple forces including my inner-drive, my family, the positive feedback from teachers, has been crucial in fostering a positive and encouraging environment, creating a sense of accomplishment that extends beyond just grades.

My deep-seated curiosity, passion for lifelong learning and desire for intellectual advancement are what drive me to achieve academic excellence. I am unapologetically competitive and will do whatever it takes, within reason, to achieve my goal. I have been waking up early at 4.00 AM since my secondary schooling when I learned that the human mind could remember to perform better with difficult tasks, including learning, in the morning. My quest to consistently place at the top of my class has been made possible by my sheer will, hard-work, diligence, and determination. As I follow a disciplined routine, stay organized, and allocate time efficiently for both study and relaxation. Regulating it serves as the foundation of my everyday schedule, making sure that I set out time for each subject and follow a structured study schedule. My capacity to be constant in the face of challenges is enhanced by this devotion, which goes beyond the academic sphere and helps me create clear goals, stay focused throughout study sessions, and withstand distraction. This method not only helped me succeed, but it also helped me develop a perseverance and dedication focused mindset that I now cherish in all facets of my life.

Throughout my academic career, my family's constant support has served as my anchor. Despite facing their battles, they never imposed hardship on me and always wished me to be a well-educated, successful individual in whatever path I choose. My parents always ask me how my day is, make sure I am eating right, accompany me when I am feeling sad, know all of my favorite foods, teach

me life lessons, attend my performances, or simply be a good listener, they have always been by my side. I learned a valuable lesson that my surroundings as the people around me is one of the determining factors for the person I want to be. This has helped me narrow down my university for my education as well.

I also understood the importance of being socially active and contributing to society. I took part in many community service projects, including blood donation, cleaning programs and awareness campaigns, which have expanded my horizons and given me a sense of obligation. I have participated in various debating tournaments and games as a school representative, and those experiences have helped me recognize that the only way someone can live in this brutal world is if they are self-assured.

I never missed a chance to grow myself in social and intellectual aspects as well. As a school representative at my military school, I often visited different fields of the Nepal army like military training, drill and parade, firearms training, basic combat techniques where I got a chance to foster a spirit of patriotism in me. These activities have improved my physical fitness and healthy work life balance. I met like-minded people through these activities, which also improved my problem-solving abilities. My overall wellbeing and academic achievement have been greatly aided by the environment of my family, friends, dedicated teachers, and varied activities.

My philosophy of life is based on hard work and consistency. My motivation to work hard, my environment, and my experiences which I have cultivated throughout years of academic pursuits have been my driving force when navigating the complexities of my life and will serve as my foundation to my next endeavors.

Murali, Afghanistan

I still love the sheep I herded to hilltop pastures when I was in primary school. We had ten and while taking to hilltops, my sister and I would take our books with us to study. But at some point, I had to choose between my two passions; my family was poor, and we had to sell the sheep to afford our education or stay out of school. We had to bid a farewell to my sheep and stick tight to our books. This is how my personal ambition for education in Afghanistan started, until the Taliban paused it, and my sister lost her life for education.

In 2021, the Taliban came back and shattered my dreams. Soon they became an extremely difficult reality of our lives, but like any difficulty which humans try to bypass, we soon found ways to bend the Taliban's rules. I and my sister were taking classes outside school at a time the doors of schools were closed to us. On the way to our class, I and my sister chatted, cracked jokes, laughed, and enjoyed our sweet sisterly relation. But it did not last long.

The last day of August 2022 arrived. That day, we woke up early and attended our class at Kaaj Educational Center. Everything seemed to be normal, but what happened later is locked in my mind. It was 7:20 AM that we heard gunfire followed by an explosion. After hearing a dazzling sound, smoke took over the class. I was wounded in my right hand, and although I could barely see things around me, I still wanted to find my sister. She was not in the class, but after six hours of non-stop search, we found her dead body in a hospital in central Kabul. My sister was one of the sixty victims of the attack and later we found out that we lost her because of an injury in her head which had remained unattended because Afghanistan does not have enough brain surgeons.

Years ago, when I had to accompany our neighbor to a doctor in the city center, the idea of becoming a health official had sparked in my mind. Seeing the low quality of services and lack of facilities, I was motivated to work in the health sector, but I was not sure which area I should focus on until the death of my sister convinced me to work on public health. Afghanistan has an extremely poor health sector and building it requires hard work and deep knowledge-something I am dedicated to pursuing.

What are my short-term goals? When the space is open enough for women in Afghanistan, I plan to work in the health sector of my home province, Ghazni. This will serve not only as the first step towards my career but also a chance to serve the rural women in Afghanistan. Later, I will work on country-level health management and through it, contribute to developing a functional health system.

College Essay: Sandhya – Nepal

Title: The Valuable Lesson from My First Academic Setback

Life can sometimes surprise us with unexpected events, and for me, it was the experience of academic failure. During my 8th-grade year, I encountered a significant setback when I failed in a subject that had always been a strength of mine - Mathematics. The initial reaction to this failure was a mix of emotions. I felt sadness, disappointment, and even a sense of inadequacy. It was the first time in my academic journey that I had faced such an obstacle. This period was particularly challenging because I was surrounded by peers, friends, and relatives who consistently excelled in their studies. The culture of comparison and competition compounded my feelings of disappointment.

Fortunately, I had a strong support system in my parents who played a pivotal role in helping me navigate this difficult phase. I was so distraught that I could not even muster an appetite for two weeks. It was during this time that

my parents imparted a valuable life lesson. They emphasized that failure is an inherent part of life, a natural step in the journey towards success. They reassured me that everyone encounters failures, and the true measure of one's character lies in how they confront and overcome these setbacks.

To illustrate this point, my parents shared their own experiences of failure and how they persevered through adversity, emerging stronger and wiser. Their stories served as an inspiration for me to approach my academic challenges with renewed determination. With their guidance, I adopted a new mindset. I started asking more questions, dedicating extra hours to practice, and exploring creative ways to comprehend mathematical concepts. This persistence paid off, as I achieved a remarkable A grade in Mathematics in my next attempt.

The journey was undoubtedly tough, but it left me with a profound understanding that failure is not a stumbling block but rather a stepping stone towards improvement and growth. This transformative experience fundamentally changed my perspective on challenges. I no longer fear setbacks; instead, I embrace them as opportunities for personal and academic growth. As I aspire to pursue higher education in the United States, I carry with me the valuable lesson that failure is not a deterrent but a catalyst for becoming a more resilient and determined individual.