

# The Collegewise Guide to Admissions for International Students

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# Part I: Introduction

Every year, more and more students from around the world apply to universities in the United States. In the 2011/12 application cycle, approximately 819,644 international students applied to an American institution of higher education (*Open Doors*, 2013). While many of these students applied from a high school in their home country, a significant percentage applied from US-based high schools, both public and private. Fairus.org states that in the 2010/11 academic year, 29,491 international students were studying at a US secondary school. These numbers are increasing every year, and US colleges and universities are doing their best to keep up.

These institutions have a variety of resources at their disposal; the Institute of International Education, the Overseas Association of College Admissions Counselors, Linden International Recruitment Tours, and the US Department of Education are just a few examples of organizations a college can turn to when seeking information on international students.

The options for the students themselves, however, are very limited. Outside of their counselors, their peers, and a handful of online resources, where can international students turn when they have questions about applying to US schools?

This handout is a good start. It won't answer all of your questions, but it will explain how your application will be reviewed and provide you with tips that will make the application process a little less scary and a lot more straightforward.

## **Who Am I?**

Before coming to Collegewise, I spent 6 years working in the International Admissions Office at Boston University. During that time, I was primarily responsible for recruitment efforts in Eastern/Southeastern Asia. I would visit up to 13 countries in the span of a month and manage the applications from this territory. My responsibilities as a whole, however, required me to read applications worldwide, which made me very familiar with initials like IB, AL, GCSE, ICSE and ISC. I estimate that I annually reviewed 2-3,000 applications, for a total of 12-18,000 applications over 6 years.

Prior to BU, I worked at The George Washington University for 5 years. I annually reviewed applications from nearly 1,200 students, less than 40% of whom were accepted. I also worked at an international boarding school in Switzerland, where I coordinated the applications for 45 seniors who represented 50+ nationalities and applied to colleges in 20+ countries.

I understand the challenges for international students, and also for the admissions officers who evaluate international applicants. I've compiled the tips in this handout to help make your admissions officer's job a little easier and, as a result, make your application stand out from the rest.

# Part II: What International Students Need to Know about US Colleges and Universities

As I mentioned in the intro, the numbers here are astounding. 819,644 international students were studying at US institutions in the 2012/13 academic year (*Open Doors*, 2013). Of these students, 250,920 were studying in the US for the first time, a 9.3% increase from the year before. And those are just the students who were *admitted*.

What's the reason for this annual increase? That's easy. International students are drawn to US colleges and universities because, collectively, these schools are seen as the finest institutions in the world. There is more perceived "value" in a US education than in a degree from any other location. Students know they can return to their home country after graduation and that the name of the school on their diploma will be easily recognized.

Of course, the very schools that draw students to the States also happen to be the most competitive.

Here's a list, arranged alphabetically, of the most selective colleges and universities in the US (i.e., they accept less than 20% of their applicants):

1. Amherst College
2. Brown University
3. California Institute of Technology
4. Claremont McKenna College
5. Columbia University
6. Cornell University
7. Dartmouth College
8. Duke University
9. Georgetown University
10. Harvard University
11. Harvey Mudd College
12. Johns Hopkins University
13. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
14. Northwestern University
15. Pomona College
16. Princeton University
17. Rice University
18. Stanford University
19. Swarthmore College
20. United States Air Force Academy
21. United States Coast Guard Academy
22. United States Military Academy
23. United States Naval Academy
24. University of Chicago
25. University of Virginia
26. University of Notre Dame
27. University of Pennsylvania
28. Williams College
29. Washington University – St. Louis
30. Yale University

Everyone knows these schools. And many of them are top choices for college-bound students around the world. The reality, however, is that these schools are just as competitive (if not more so) for international students as they are for domestic students. Out of an overall pool of 35,023 students this year, Harvard admitted 2,047. Only about 200 of these students were

international students. Of the 1,359 students in Yale's freshman class, only 12% are international students. Cal Tech's freshman class is comprised of 997 students, only 5% of whom came from an international high school.

Similar numbers can be found for the rest of the schools on this list. And when you start diving into strength of curriculum, test scores and GPAs, the odds of being accepted by one of these elite schools becomes even more staggering. These are the finest institutions in the world, so it's no surprise that they're so difficult to get into.

So, should you even apply to these schools? If you've done the work that will give you a competitive edge, of course. But these numbers prove that it's extremely difficult for any student to be accepted, domestic *or* international. If you're interested in attending school in the US, it's a good idea to also apply to some schools that accept more than 20% of their applicants. It just makes good sense.

This guide is designed to help you with that process. By following the advice and recommendations here, you can avoid some of the mistakes that thousands of international students make each year. Your application will be more competitive for admission, you'll

present yourself in the best way possible, and you'll increase your chances of attending college in the US.

# Part III: What Do Colleges Look for in International Applicants?

Overall, US schools look for the same things in international applicants as they do in domestic students. However, there are a few additional requirements for international students, and the application process may involve a few more steps, so let's tackle these components one by one:

## **Strength of Schedule**

Hands down, this is the most important part of your application. Universities want to see what classes you're taking and how you are doing in said classes. For the majority of schools, it's not enough to just have good grades. They want to see you're also challenging yourself as much as possible. They want to see that you're going above and beyond the minimum requirements.

So what does this mean? Well, if you're in an IB Diploma program, colleges will be looking at what you're taking for HL and SL and determining how challenging that program is. If you're taking ALs, they'll be looking at the subjects you've chosen to focus on *and* how many exams you're taking. Don't be surprised if they take a peek at the ASLs as well. Oh, and while the GCSEs might technically fulfill your high school graduation requirements, many colleges see this

as meeting only the bare minimum application requirements. They'll want to see that you've continued to challenge yourself.

Again, it's not just the grades that count, but also the specific coursework you do and the classes you take to earn those grades. So play to your strengths. Don't take a class you know you'll fail, but do make sure you're challenging yourself as much as possible.

### **Testing**

Figuring out what tests to take can often feel like you're getting lost in the alphabet. There's the SAT, ACT, TOEFL, iBT, IELTS... It's hard to know which one you should take and which one you *need* to take. So let's break it down a bit.

### **SAT/ACT**

Unless they are test optional, US colleges will require you to take either the SAT or the ACT. It truly makes no difference which one you take, but currently, the SAT is more widely available throughout the world. If you're fortunate enough to live somewhere where both tests are offered, choose the one you think you'll do best on. It's as simple as that.

Many universities will also ask for subject tests. As tempting as it is, I do not recommend taking the test in your native language. There is really nothing to gain by this, as an admissions officer is going to expect a high score on this test and might even hold it against you if you don't score well.

### **English Proficiency**

There are also English proficiency exams. When colleges ask for these, they're really just trying to determine if you'll be able to understand what is going on in class. Let's face it, college is challenging. It's even more challenging when you're learning in a language that isn't your first. That's where these exams come in.

Many students look for a way out of this exam, and I don't necessarily blame them. The tests are expensive, and who wants to spend a couple hours taking a test if you don't have to? More times than not, however, I'll recommend a student take either the TOEFL or IELTS. The reason is simple: it's the most efficient way of making an admissions officer comfortable with your level of English proficiency.

It's important to note that the TOEFL/IELTS is not the only factor in determining English proficiency. Admissions officers will also look at the level of English courses a student is taking,

as well as how many years he's been in mainstream English and how he's done in these classes. They'll also evaluate the student's essays and quality of writing, and they'll look at teacher recommendations to see if the student is comfortable participating in class. All of these factors can help create a picture of English proficiency. But without an English proficiency exam, it's just guesswork. A good score on one of these exams will eliminate that guesswork for admissions officers. So, even though it is possible to have the English proficiency requirement waived without taking one of these exams, it's usually best to just go ahead and take the TOEFL/IELTS.

While the paper version of the TOEFL is still offered in some locations, most students take either the iBT (internet based TOEFL) or the IELTS. Universities will typically have a minimum band score they want to see for the IELTS and minimum sub-scores for the iBT. Because of this, many students attempt to work the system and just study for one subsection at a time. These students will typically get a 25 in writing, but receive scores in the low teens in all the other sections. But this approach usually backfires since you have to send in full test results for all sittings. There is no way to just send that high writing score. And there's no telling how an admissions officer is going to interpret those low scores, but it's usually not in a positive manner. Be sure to treat all sections equally, and don't blow off some of the subsections to focus on just one.

## **Native Speakers**

Admissions officers will frequently get questions like, “I’m a US citizen, but I live abroad. Do I still need to take the TOEFL?” The most common answer? “Maybe.” In most instances, it comes down to what the student’s SAT/ACT scores look like. If an applicant is multilingual and scoring lower on those verbal sections (below a 550), taking the iBT or IELTS could be a good move. Scoring well on those tests (which most of these students are likely to do) will show the admissions officer that those lower verbal scores are just a language issue and that the student is capable of handling the college workload. Not taking one of those tests means your admissions officer will have to draw her own conclusion, and there’s no guarantee that her final decision will be a positive one. In instances like these, it’s always a good idea to give your admissions counselor as much information as possible.

## **Letters of Rec**

Universities will ask you for letters of recommendation. The exact requirements will vary, but you can be assured of one thing: colleges will want to hear from at least one teacher and also someone who fills the guidance counselor/college counselor/advisor role. For the teacher recs, be sure to read the instructions closely. Some colleges will want the letter to be written only by teachers of certain subjects, while other colleges won’t have any specific restrictions. Be sure,

however, to only provide the number of recs a college asks for. The last thing you want to do is give your admissions officer more to read.

Depending on your particular high school, it might be difficult to determine who should write that second letter of recommendation. Admissions officers want to hear about the program you're taking, how competitive it is in relation to that of other programs, and any additional information (be it academic or personal) that adds to your application. If your school doesn't have a specified person to write such letters, an advisor should be able to do this for you.

### **Essays**

We'll talk more about essays later in this guide. Just remember, this isn't an opportunity to brag or to impress. Instead, the admissions officer will use your essay as a way to get to know you better and on a more personal level. Think about what you really want colleges to know about you, and write about that.

### **Financial Documentation**

One of the most difficult aspects of being an international student is the fact that many universities do not offer need-based financial aid. Many offer academic scholarships, but those tend to be very competitive. Need-based aid is even more difficult to obtain if you are not a US

citizen. In fact, universities even require students to submit financial documentation proving they will be able to meet the annual costs of tuition.

These forms are very straightforward. They must be signed by a parent/guardian and signed and stamped by a bank official. In addition, each school requires that a minimum account balance be maintained (specific amounts can be found on individual college websites). There are a few things to keep in mind when completing these forms:

Students must show liquid assets. Essentially, universities want to see that money is in a bank account, not an investment account. It can be divided between multiple accounts, but colleges do want to see that it is liquid.

Universities want an original copy of the bank statement. It is sometimes possible to be conditionally accepted with a photocopy, but an official copy will be required to make admission permanent.

In lieu of a bank statement, a letter from the bank can usually be submitted. This must be on official letterhead, have at least the names of the sponsor on it, and show the required balance.

Some students might have won a national scholarship (Thai Royal Scholars or Bolashak Scholars are two examples). Students in these situations can submit a letter from the scholarship board in lieu of a bank letter.

# Part IV: Choosing Colleges

It's no secret that colleges are looking to diversify their student body. The more diverse a school is, the more attractive it becomes to students. And one of the easiest ways to do this is to attract more international students. A common question being asked in admissions offices across the US is "How can we get more international students?" Some will decide that they need to travel more and visit as many countries as possible. Others will decide that it's better to do targeted travel and visit only those countries where interest is guaranteed. Regardless of the strategy, the intent is the same: get more international applicants.

*U.S. News & World Report* lists the following 10 schools as having the largest percentage of international students in the US:

1. New School, New York, NY. 29%
2. Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, FL. 28%
3. Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL. 23%
4. Lynn University, Boca Raton, FL. 22%
5. University of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK. 22%
6. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. 18%
7. Purdue University-West Lafayette, West Lafayette, IN. 17%
8. University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY. 16%
9. University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA. 16%
10. Northeastern University, Boston, MA. 15%

There are a couple of things I noticed right away about this list. First of all, not one of the “most selective” universities appears on it. The second is that not one of these institutions has the word “college” in its name. This is not surprising considering the fact that, as a whole, international students seem resistant to attending a “college” and instead desire a university. But, in the process, they eliminate thousands of great options. Broaden your horizons when conducting your search. Don’t just focus on the universities; give the colleges a shot too. You might be surprised with what you find.

Here’s something else to keep in mind. I always advise the international students I work with to think about what will make them most comfortable while away at college. Do they want a large international student population? Do they want to go to school with other students from their home country? Will they have family nearby? If not, is that important? Sure, it’s important for the school to offer the major and degree you want, internships, study abroad programs, etc., but given the distance international students must travel from their homes, being comfortable on campus is certainly an important factor to consider.

## **A few words about outside firms**

At the risk of spiting my chosen profession, I think it's important to talk about outside firms who guarantee admission to a US university. Frankly, any organization that makes this claim is not being truthful. There's just no way they can guarantee something like that and, unfortunately, it frequently comes at a high cost to students.

There are, obviously, reputable organizations out there. There are lots of people doing good and important work in this field who are well worth the investment. Just make sure you know exactly who you'll be working with before signing on. Find out as much as you can about an individual's background and ask for proof of any results he or she may be promising. The more information you have, the better decision you'll be able to make (much like with the college search as a whole).

# Part V: Completing Applications

So you've gotten to the point where you're ready to start filling out applications. You've done your research on the universities you're interested in, considering things such as location, majors and international student population. The applications themselves seem really daunting, however, and you want to make sure you're filling them out correctly.

The best rule to follow here is a simple one: don't overthink it, and be sure to give the universities exactly what they're looking for. Since many students tend to get tripped up in the same areas, let's explore those a little more in depth.

## **Name Game**

Every year, admissions offices will receive thousands of incomplete applications. Most of these seem to be international applications, and the reason for this is simple: students are inconsistent with the name they use while applying. Most of the time, all of the materials for a student's application will physically be in the office, but the admissions officer won't know this because the materials all have a different name on them. There will be the student's given name, then his nickname, then his super-secret nickname only his friends call him... It's a mess,

but it's easily avoided. Make sure you use the same name on all application materials. The name on your passport should be the same as the name on your application, your test scores, your transcript, and all supplemental materials. This will ensure your application is complete from the get-go.

### **Citizenship**

The question of citizenship can also be a tricky one. Students will often ask which passport they should apply under. If you're a US citizen, the answer is simple: you're a US citizen and don't get to choose. Students often think they will have an advantage if they apply under another citizenship, but when you consider that you won't have to supply financial documentation or take English proficiency exams (not to mention the fact that it will be easier to qualify for financial aid) when applying as a US citizen, I think it all evens out.

Students who have multiple citizenships of the non-US variety should choose the one of their primary residence. This is where they will be applying for their student visa, and in the end, the whole process will be a lot smoother.

### **Schools attended**

It's quite common to come across international students who have attended multiple high schools. While admissions officers are usually savvy enough to be able to piece that together by looking at transcripts, here's where you can make their job easier: be sure to list all of the **high schools** you've attended in the appropriate section (middle schools are not necessary). Admissions officers understand that a parent's job might require a change in schooling or that a student might enroll in a new high school in order to take the IB. But clearly listing the schools you've attended on your application gives admissions officers a heads up before they look at your transcript. This way they know to be extra careful when reviewing your coursework and grades.

Sometimes you might attend a high school that has more than one location. Most high schools will have a CEEB code (a code assigned by the College Board and used by universities to keep track of high schools in an internal databases), but not all do. It's helpful in instances like these to be as precise as possible. Rather than just saying "Shanghai American School," be more specific with "Shanghai American School, Puxi Campus." Entering accurate information helps your admissions officer make a more efficient and timely decision on your application.

## **Supplements**

Most universities on the Common Application will require a supplement. This is important for two reasons. One, they'll usually ask for more visa information (home country, if you're a US permanent resident, etc.). Two, there is usually a supplemental essay that frequently asks why the student is interested in that particular university.

Many students, domestic and international alike, struggle with this essay. But international students, as a whole, seem to have the most trouble. And the reason is simple: most students spend too much time telling admissions officers things they already know rather than telling them what they really *want* to know. And what they want to know is why their school is a good match for that particular applicant. Colleges don't want to know what their ranking is or what their academic offerings are. They already know where they're located and what majors they offer. What they don't know, and what they're really asking, is what does that mean to the student? *Why* do these statistics make the school a good fit? *Why* is the student interested in spending four years there? They want to know why you're interested in attending their school, so tell them!

### **Transcripts**

So much of the world of admissions seems based on conjecture. What's the best major? How important are essays? Do admissions officers even read letters of rec? Well, here's one

undisputable fact: no matter what part of the world you're from, your high school transcript is always the most important part of your application. The courses you're taking and the marks you're achieving speak more to your college readiness than any other aspect of your application.

Most students think their responsibility in regard to their transcript is straightforward: fill it with the most challenging classes they can take, get the best grades they can, and then make sure their counselor sends it off. If that's been done, their job is over.

There are, however, several things a student can do to ensure that an admissions officer has all the information necessary to make a fully-informed decision.

### **List your classes fully when asked**

Students have several opportunities to list their current classes, usually in the “Educational information” section of the application, on the International supplement, and on the Secondary School Report. This is not an opportunity to just write “IB” and call it a day. Many times it will be difficult to decipher exactly which classes a student is taking from just reading her transcript. Listing these classes in a clear manner, in the specific places provided, ensures that your admissions officer will give you the credit you deserve. Sure, it's easier to skip these sections,

but taking the time to fill them out ensures that your application will be efficiently and thoroughly reviewed.

### **Give them what they need**

Here's a pretty common scenario: A student is taking the ALs. When asked to submit transcripts, he sends in his predicted scores, then sits back and thinks, "I'm all set. I've sent them everything they need." With universities in the UK and elsewhere in the world, this indeed may be the case. These colleges' decisions are usually conditional, and they won't make a final decision until those test results come back in July. They're comfortable accepting a student based on predicted scores because they know they can rescind that offer if those predicted scores don't hold true. Universities in the US, however, don't operate that way. Sure, they've been known to rescind decisions if a student drops off academically, but they're not comfortable making a decision based on predicted grades. They want to see a student's entire body of high school work. This means years 9-12 (or through 13, depending on where you are located). And this also means year end exams, internals and predicted grades. They want the whole package when making their decision.

Because the US is usually unique in this regard, most high school transcripts aren't set up to provide admissions counselors with all of the information they need. And many high school

counselors don't anticipate this fact. This is where it becomes the job of the student to make sure all of this information is being sent to the schools of his choice. This ensures that admissions officers have all the information they need from the beginning, creating an efficient and smooth application review process for the student.

### **Make sure you've submitted all academic work**

Here's another no-brainer: if you've switched high schools a time or two in your life, make sure the admissions office has transcripts from each school, **even if you repeated a year**. Sometimes your current high school will do this for you by listing the previous school's grades and classes on your current transcript. If this is the case, you're golden and don't need to do anything else (as long as the actual classes and grades are listed and don't just show up as credit). If this isn't the case, however, make sure you also submit a copy of your transcript from those other schools. Remember, admissions officers like to see the entirety of your academic history. They can't do that if they only have two years of high school work.

# Part VI: Words of Wisdom for High School Counselors

If you've been a college counselor for a couple of years and regularly have students applying to the US, you know what you're doing by now. I have a lot of respect for the knowledge and experience in the international counseling community and am not about to say, "Here's what you're doing wrong and how to fix it." However, during my time in admissions, I did discover that there are a few things you can do to guarantee a smoother application review process:

## **Submit all transcripts**

I know I've already mentioned this, but it's a big one. Too often, I would just receive predicted grades. Or a copy of the ALs and nothing else. While I realize that may work for other countries, it doesn't work in the US. Admissions officers here want to see the full body of academic work. At the very least, they want to see any and all exam results.

## **Classes should be clearly listed on the transcript**

This is a tough one, because it isn't necessarily something counselors can control. But if you can, urge students to make sure their classes are clearly listed on their transcript. I would often see classes listed in ways that likely made sense to the registrar, but no one else. If a student is

taking the IB, make sure the admissions officer will know which classes are HL and which are SL. Making sure the little details on the transcript are clear to an AD will make for a smoother process.

### **Follow the tips in this guide**

It sounds a little self-serving, but I think this guide works just as well for counselors as it does for students. Making sure students are submitting the best applications they can is the goal, and this guide will help them with that process.

One of the reasons I decided to write this guide was because I couldn't find a lot of resources for international students. However, of those that are available, I found the following to be the most useful for students:

### **Open Doors Report**

The Institute of International Education compiles an annual report called *Open Doors* that tracks the number of international students studying in the US. I've always found it a fascinating read and have enjoyed seeing what countries students are coming from, where they're choosing to study, etc. You can find it online at [www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org).

### **NACAC**

The [National Association for College Admissions Counseling](#) (NACAC) is an organization of more than 13,000 counselors, admissions offices and other professionals dedicated to helping students pursue higher education. They've compiled their own list of helpful resources for international students [here](#).

### **If the U Fits: Expert Advice on Finding the Right College and Getting Accepted**

Written by the founder of Collegewise, Kevin McMullin, *If the U Fits* is full of great college admission advice and offers the best overview of the application process I've seen (and I'm not just saying that because he signs my paychecks). This book will be helpful for students from any country and is available [here](#), or on any website you currently use to buy books.

### **Collegewise Counselors**

This may sound like shameless self-promotion, but Collegewise is a great resource for international college counseling. I've already talked a bit about my experience in this guide. And my colleague, Arun Ponnusamy, has worked at a highly-selective institution and has experience counseling international students and reviewing their applications. You can learn more about both of us, and the work we do, at [www.collegewise.com/counselors/international](http://www.collegewise.com/counselors/international).

## **About the Author**

[Tim Townley](#) is the director of international admissions counseling at Collegewise. After earning a degree in international relations from The George Washington University (GW), Tim evaluated more than 20,000 college applications during admissions tenures at his alma mater, and later at Boston University where he was an assistant director of international admissions. He has also served as a college counselor at the American School in Switzerland where he advised students from more than 50 countries.

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