

UES

EXPERT ADMISSIONS

TEACHERS' GUIDE TO US COLLEGE APPLICATIONS 2022-23



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The last 30 months have been difficult for students worldwide, with exams and tests cancelled or postponed, new methods of learning, and universities adjusting to new ways of assessing applicants. Coupled with Brexit and the increased competition for places in the UK, this has resulted in a lot of change for international students, particularly in terms of US applicants from the UK.

The number of UK students applying to America for university rose dramatically (by 23%) in the Fall 2021 entry round compared to the year before, and has stayed roughly similar for the latest round. What's more, schools that typically only see a handful of students applying each year are suddenly seeing numbers rise into the double figures, and their university advisors' workloads increase as a result.

Nevertheless, there are very good reasons to encourage students to apply overseas. American universities represent a life-changing opportunity: they are some of the very best in the world, ranking considerably higher than most UK universities on international scales. With the career opportunities that come with international education, and the prestige of many US colleges, parents are now asking schools not only about their success with Russell Group and Oxbridge placements, but also with American colleges. Expertise in US applications will become more and more important to schools.

However, this academic excellence, coupled with a seemingly impenetrable application process, still puts off a great many students who think they might lose motivation, can't manage the process, or aren't good enough to go. But with the right support, more students, families and schools are realising that they *are* capable, that they can compete on that level, and that it is worth pursuing. Importantly, they are realising that US universities needn't be anywhere near as expensive as they appear on paper.

The latter point is especially pertinent for today's students, as UK tuition fees rise and financial help decreases. In the US, there is an astounding amount of finance available, and students from places such as Jersey may even be eligible for help from their own government *in addition* to this US-based aid.

Students will not find out about these opportunities without the help of schools – in particular, schools that promote US college education as a genuine, exciting alternative or addition to UK universities, and that are willing to push their students through the process, providing them with help along the way. Schools that have made this decision have seen the number of students applying to and attending college in the US increase exponentially; it's not uncommon for schools to have 30-40 students apply each year. It's become expected that if you're applying to university, you should apply to the UK, Europe, and the US.

These schools promote and talk about university as part of a global education. They don't make the term UCAS synonymous with post-sixth form; they make 'international' the buzzword.

University in the US isn't for everyone, and it takes effort to apply, but it's something that every student should consider, just as they should consider everywhere in the world that has good educational establishments. Students deserve to be told about these opportunities, and to be supported in their applications, just as if they were applying to the UK or elsewhere.

This guide will explain how to manage the process, and how to promote the US to students. It can seem difficult and time-consuming at first, but hopefully this will go some way to aiding you. If you ever need any more help, don't hesitate to email me on jason@ueseducation.com

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There are many benefits to a US university education, and the easiest way to encourage students to consider applying (and to motivate them whilst applying) is to outline these benefits regularly.

Schools should consider holding regular on-site or virtual presentations and information sessions for parents and students; some suggestions for this are outlined at the end of this guide. Regardless of these more formal events, when talking to students it's important to outline the benefits below, so that students know why they might consider applying to the US.

1. THE BEST UNIVERSITIES IN THE WORLD

It often surprises students just how good US universities are, even when you tell them that there are some 4500 colleges in the USA! Last year, the Times newspaper ranked the top 100 universities in the world, and 37 of them were American. By contrast, only 11 were British. Considering the top 20 UK universities, there are 52 equivalently ranked US universities. There are 65 that are more selective than Oxford and Cambridge! This means there are plenty of US colleges that students have never heard of, but that far outrank most UK universities.

2. FLEXIBILITY OF SUBJECT AREA

One of the key differences between US and UK degrees is the flexibility of an undergraduate degree in the USA. Courses are four years long and allow far greater scope for trying new subjects. In fact, students will *have* to try new topics! Students do not normally have to declare a specific area of study when they apply; instead, they take core modules (such as literature, math, languages, and science) as well as electives in a range of other subjects. They will then decide upon their Major (their chosen subject area) at the end of their second year of study (the main exception to this is Engineering, where students may have to declare their course choice when applying).

This freedom to sample new areas of knowledge and to specialise later is hugely beneficial to most students, unless they are 100% certain they only want to study a specific subject.

3. LIBERAL ARTS

Most students will study what is known as Liberal Arts. The idea behind a liberal arts degree is that students should gain wide knowledge of various philosophical, scientific, and social schools of thought in order to critically understand the world around them on an interdisciplinary level. In addition to their major, students will take classes from broad subject areas - such as sciences, the arts and humanities, and social sciences - in order to graduate. There will often be a writing skills requirement and possibly a foreign language requirement.

The choice of curriculum varies between institutions. Some colleges (such as Columbia) have what's called a Core Curriculum, which include modules in Exploring Literature, Art, Humanities, Music, and Frontiers of Science. At others (such as Yale) there are Distribution Requirements, which allow students to choose their classes within broad topic areas such as Humanities and Arts, Sciences, Social Sciences, and Quantitative Reasoning. Some (famously Brown) offer an Open Curriculum in which students have the freedom to choose any classes they wish, as long as they complete a minimum number of modules overall and a set number of modules within their major (around 8-10).

See here for a full description: ueseducation.com/blog/college-curricula



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UK universities are, by contrast, highly specialised, with little room for choice outside of students' particular subject.

It is worth noting that students can also graduate with a double major (in two sometimes wildly different subjects) or have additional minors (which require fewer courses in the minor areas). For example, a student could easily major in Astrophysics with a minor in French Philosophy.

4. TEACHING STYLE

Class sizes and teaching styles vary in the US. Large research universities may have lectures of a few hundred attendees (for the very popular courses), while small Liberal Arts colleges may have seminar-style lessons with just a handful of students. A US education allows students to choose what style suits them and base their university choices on that preference.

Additionally, contact time is very important in the US: most students will have something like 15 hours per week of class time, regardless of the subjects taken.

5. STATE-OF-THE-ART FACILITIES

Most colleges to which students will be applying have large endowments, which means that they can afford to invest in the latest technology and equipment. Science labs are the best in the world; the libraries are huge; the dining facilities are fantastic; and the sporting facilities and venues are out of this world.

6. RESEARCH

America spends more on research (in total and per capita) than any other country in the world. Furthermore, many of the big universities are geared towards cutting-edge research. This knowledge filters down to undergraduate level; indeed, students may end up being taught by Nobel laureates.

7. STUDENT LIFE

Life on campus is geared towards allowing students to pursue whatever interests they have (to a high level, if they wish) whilst connecting them with like-minded peers. There are usually hundreds of clubs and societies available, and universities will gladly assist in setting up a new one if it doesn't exist.

The Greek system of fraternities and sororities does exist at many colleges, and this can be very rewarding for students who take part, but it is by no means compulsory. Students will have plenty of other things to do!

Additionally, the diverse nature of student bodies in the US means students will make friends from lots of different subjects and be exposed to backgrounds, cultures, and ways of thinking they might never have imagined.

8. SPORTS

Not everyone is an elite athlete (though many universities have quite a number!) but sport is still a big part of life on campus. Students get behind their local teams in a big way, and they might end up watching their college team play American Football in their own 100,000-seat stadium.

And at the amateur level, sport participation is encouraged – there are hundreds of clubs to join (though again, it's by no means obligatory!)



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9. AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Studying abroad is a life-changing opportunity for students: it exposes them to different ways of thinking, and opens their minds to new cultures. Not only that, it's also a lot of fun! They will be on a campus with lots of international people, contributing to their understanding of many different backgrounds and cultures.

More pertinent from a parent's point of view is a student's job prospects. In today's global world, international experience is almost essential. In a recent Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) survey of 230 UK companies, one in three employers valued job applicants with international study experience, and 65% favoured applicants with overseas work experience. Students will be able to work for up to 20 hours per week during their studies, and are allowed to work in the US for up to one year after graduation on the Optional Practical Training scheme. Students in the sciences and engineering can stay on for up to two years.

Furthermore, American universities are exceptional at creating and maintaining alumni networks. There are many active groups of former students in London and other major cities, and alumni networks organise regular events. These links are extremely important in careers, as they help with recommendations and references.

10. DECISIONS, NOT OFFERS

One of the most attractive things about applying to America, from a student's perspective, is the fact that they will receive a decision on or before 1st April – *before* they even take their final IB or A-Level exams! This means that they will have far less pressure when taking their exams. If they drop a grade here or there they probably won't be rejected by the college. This also means that after their exams, there is not as much anxious waiting for results as there is for UCAS. The idea behind this is that the colleges aim to get an overall picture of the student's mentality and attitude, and that final results don't tell the whole story. It's also because the American GPA system of continuous assessment is difficult to reconcile with the A-Level or IB system.

However, this is not to say that students can slack off after they receive a decision – if they get significantly lower grades than predicted, the colleges will start asking questions, and may even make them take remedial classes when they begin. In a worst case scenario they could even have their offers rescinded.

It should also be noted that if students from a certain school routinely achieve grades different than predicted, this can have a negative impact on the school, as the US colleges will begin to distrust predicted grades from that school. It's therefore important to be honest when predicting grades, not cave to any pressure to 'inflate' predictions, and to make sure that students who have been accepted to college don't become lax in their work ethic.



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WHAT IS MEANT BY HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS?

The way US colleges select their students can seem very strange and inconsistent. You might have a student who scores perfectly on the entrance tests, has perfect GCSEs and is predicted all A*s at A-Level, is offered a place at Cambridge, but is rejected from every Ivy League college. On the other hand, you might have a student who gets solid but not spectacular test scores and isn't an A* student but is offered a place at Princeton.

The reason is that in general, US colleges are looking for more than just excellent academic potential; there are many other qualities that are considered. Some colleges list up to 20 areas of consideration!

Top grades are not enough (and not even always necessary) to be admitted to a top-flight US college. Harvard like to say, for example, that they could fill all their freshman places with students who have achieved perfect grades in their entrance tests and school exams. But they do not do this, because they look beyond pure academics: they want to know what sort of student they're getting, and grades do not tell the whole story.

The problem is that outside of the US, schools aren't necessarily aware of what the US colleges are looking for, and what they take into account when judging applications. These factors are very different from those of UK universities.

Instead, colleges want to know what makes a student tick: they are less interested in a list of accomplishments than in what motivates applicants to excel. What do students do in addition to schoolwork? How do they contribute to society? What organisational roles have they taken on? What are they really passionate about? Why do they really want to come to this college? **What can this student offer the institution?**

What different colleges want varies, but what is consistent is that they want to admit as diverse a student body as possible. This doesn't just mean race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, but also geographical location and personal interests. Students who can stand out and demonstrate that they offer something different from others, but who 'fit' the college, are more likely to be offered a place. **So how do colleges assess this?**

In general, a panel of people within the college, called admissions officers, will go through the below process (roughly in order) to consider an applicant:

- Assess transcripts and predicted grades
- Assess standardised test scores
- Assess the student's extracurricular activities
- Read teachers' and counsellors' recommendation letters
- Assess the student's Common App and supplementary essays (or equivalent)
- Read the student's interview report
- Consider the student's demonstrated interest

Not all colleges do things the same way, and some place more weight on certain parts than others. However, students can be put in the 'no' pile at any point, and any stage can raise red flags for the admissions officers. Students should try to raise as few flags as possible, by putting effort into all parts of their application!

Rutgers once described the process as looking for the **pearls in the glue**. All of the parts of the process should reinforce each other, sticking all the evidence together, and then the essays should reveal a pearl: something that student tells them that nothing else did, which shines out above everything else, and makes the reader think: *this is the student we want*.



ELEMENTS OF HOLISTIC REVIEW

'Fit' is a very common but important word in US applications. Colleges have an idea of the sort of campus profile, complete with values and philosophy, they want to create, and are looking for the students who match this.

This is why choosing the right college is so important. If you're the wrong fit, you won't be accepted, no matter how amazing you are academically. A student who fits Columbia, for example, would be a terrible fit for Dartmouth, even though they are of similar academic standings.

How is fit determined?

There are many ways of assessing fit. They include obvious things, such as location, size, climate, sports, majors offered, and required courses, but also such intangible factors as political engagement, peer-to-peer relationships, and values.

College lists can be whittled down on practical points, but then students really have to find out what it's like there, by reading the website, visiting the college, speaking to students and reps, reading student reviews and newsletters, and doing virtual tours. Although current restrictions limit travel and in-person visits, there are a wealth of online opportunities for potential applicants, such as virtual campus tours and information sessions with admissions officers.

In the end, students should be able to express what makes a good-fit college for them, and have a list of colleges where they know they would fit in. If they can get this across to the colleges in their applications (via their essays, extracurricular activities, meetings with reps and perhaps interviews) they will have a much better chance of being accepted, and will get more out of their university experience.

1. PREDICTED GRADES AND TRANSCRIPTS

In the US, students receive a GPA (Grade Point Average) that reflects their ongoing achievement at school. In the UK, achievement is generally assessed on just a few final exams. Colleges therefore want as much information as possible to help them form a picture of the student's current ability and academic potential, especially when you consider that they have to make a decision before the final A-Level/IB results are released.

For this reason, colleges will ask for GCSE grades, predicted grades, school profile, and teacher and counsellor recommendations. This overall picture allows the colleges to form an understanding of the student's potential, rather than placing weight on the final exams.

Remember: excellent academic results do not mean that a student is guaranteed a place!

A note on A-Levels: some schools only allow students to take three A-Levels. In this case, it's important that the school explains this on their school profile. The student won't be at a disadvantage if they couldn't do anything about it. However, if a student chooses to drop an A-Level, they should have a very good reason. Simply finding it too hard won't look good, but if they want to concentrate on another passion, then that might be acceptable.

A note on predicted grades: it's in the school's interest to make accurate predictions. Whilst the decisions aren't based on grades alone, results that vary from predictions will be cause for concern, and may make the colleges view the schools' future predictions with scepticism.



2. STANDARDISED TEST SCORES

Standardised tests (SAT/ACT) might take time and cause a lot of anxiety on the part of the student, but in the end the tests aren't given a huge amount of consideration by admissions officers. In typical years, they are a filtering process: some colleges have over 100,000 applicants each year, and standardised tests are an easy way to whittle people out. There is no pass or fail mark – rather, each college will have in mind a 'safe zone' of scores (informed by previous cohorts): if a student's scores fall well outside this range, admissions officers at top colleges will be unlikely to look further at their application. But if the student's scores fall in the usual range of accepted applicants, then admissions officers will put their application into the next round of consideration.

Now, with most colleges being test-optional for at least the next couple of years, students who were able to sit the tests will need to think about whether submitting test scores will put them at an advantage or a disadvantage in the context of their overall application. They should only submit test scores that are good and on par with their school grades and the range the college would expect.

3. EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

US universities attach huge importance to extracurricular interests, because it shows them what kind of a person the student is. Colleges want a diverse range of students who will participate in many activities and make their campus a thriving, exciting place to be.

This doesn't mean that students should just pick a few hobbies to put on their CV; it means choosing things that they are genuinely interested in and want to pursue, even during intense periods of school. Going to a few society meetings or fundraising events is not enough; nor is starting a hobby in Year 13! Students should aim to be getting involved in things earlier in their lives, in order to show commitment and passion.

Leadership is particularly important: it shows organisational ability and ambition. Students don't have to be presidents and captains, but they should be looking for ways that allow them to contribute to a greater degree and show initiative.

Community involvement is also significant. Colleges want to know how students see their place in society.

Another key characteristic is intellectual curiosity. Students should show that they are curious about lots of subjects, not just the few things they're studying at school. US colleges believe (rightly) that the most successful students are those who have an insatiable curiosity about the world around them. Students should show evidence that they read beyond their IB or A-Level subjects, make the most of extracurricular academic opportunities, and attend external lectures and events.

4. TEACHER AND COUNSELLOR RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of their applications, students will be asked to nominate a counsellor and one or two teachers, all of whom will need to write letters of recommendation. These give the colleges more insight into the student and how they think, what drives them, and whether what they've been saying is true! These are discussed further on in this guide.



5. INTERVIEWS

Interviews for US colleges are possibly the nicest part of the whole application. Not all colleges will interview, in person or online. They do this through their networks of alumni, who will meet students in cafés or on Zoom and chat to them about their lives, what they study, what they're interested in, and why they want to go to that college. Interviewers are rarely given any information in advance – the college wants them to get a completely unbiased impression.

Students should prepare by thinking about what sets them apart, and what makes them suited to that college. They should dress smartly (not in a suit, but not in shorts and flip-flops), turn up early, and be polite and friendly. They should have plenty of questions prepared in order to show a genuine interest. They are a chance for students to show that they are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the college to which they're applying, and are a good fit.

6. ESSAYS

Possibly the most influential things that admissions officers look at are the student's application essays. They are short essays that the student submits as part of their application, and are the make-or-break part of the process. More advice is given later in this guide.

7. DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

An oft-overlooked aspect of US admissions is 'demonstrated interest', which is where universities try to assess how interested an applicant really is in attending. If, for example, the college has to decide between two equally qualified and well-suited students, and one of them has emailed the college, attended a tour, and spoken to their admissions rep at a fair, while the other one hasn't made any contact, the college will take the one who has shown more interest. This is because of 'yield' – they want to be certain that the people they admit will actually attend.

Interest is logged at all opportunities by the universities. Examples include:

- Emailing the college to ask for information (with pertinent questions, of course)
- Speaking to admissions reps at fairs, and when they visit the student's school
- Visiting the college, and speaking to admissions officers when they do so
- Following the college on social media and signing up to newsletters
- Following up after meeting reps with thank-you emails
- Applying early!

A comprehensive guide: ueseducation.com/blog/demonstrated-interest-blog

8. ANOTHER POINT TO CONSIDER: DIVERSITY

US colleges are usually aiming to have as many US states and other countries represented as possible, whilst maintaining quality.

For example, here are some statistics from Johns Hopkins' Class of 2024:

- 52% female
- 50 US states; 13% international students, representing 29 countries
- 16% first-generation students
- 79% don't identify as white Caucasian



Probably the single biggest reason students and families are put off applying to the US for university is the cost. On paper they are expensive: top colleges can cost up to £52,000 per year *before* living costs are taken into account.

However, most students don't pay anywhere near this figure, due to the amount of funding available. Furthermore, the fees at many US colleges are comparable to those of UK universities, especially if students are counted as international students.

Of course, most students (unless they are American citizens) won't be eligible for a loan in the same way that UK students are. However, there are plenty of other sources of funding available. The important thing is for students and families to think about finance whilst they apply, not afterwards!

1. NEED-BASED AID

Many colleges have the ability to ensure that their students can afford to attend, regardless of their situation. These forms of aid fall into two camps: Need-Blind and Need-Aware, and are as simple to apply for as ticking a box on the application form.

Need-Blind

There are seven colleges that are Need-Blind and Full-Need for international students: Amherst, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and Bowdoin. These universities make their admissions decisions without taking into account a student's financial situation. When a student applies, the college does not ask if they can afford to attend. If admitted, the college will then means-test the student and meet the full financial need of the student (including travel, book, etc).

Need-Aware

Need-Aware institutions assess an application with an awareness of the student's ability to pay. These institutions have a certain amount of funding available to assist international students who cannot afford to pay the full fees. The funding is more limited, and the amount offered will vary between each institution.

How funding is calculated

Means-testing involves the college assessing the student's family's incomes, assets, and outgoings (such as siblings needing financing through university). The college will then make a decision based on what they feel the family can afford to pay, taking into account what they consider to be 'reasonable sacrifices' on the part of the family. In many cases, families on a low income may find the cost of attending some institutions would actually be less than attending university in the UK. To gain a rough idea of what financial aid families might be entitled to, many colleges provide financial aid calculators on their websites, eg <http://admission.princeton.edu/financialaid/estimator>

Roughly speaking, if a family's combined income is much above \$100,000 (£70,000), they may only be entitled to very minimal financial assistance at some colleges and nothing at others. Colleges with very large endowment funds (such as Harvard and Princeton) can afford to be much more generous with financial aid and will means-test higher levels of income.



Example: Financial aid at Harvard

- If a family's annual income falls below \$65,000, they pay nothing.
- Families earning between \$65,000 and \$150,000, the expected contribution is between 0% and 10% of their annual income.
- 60% of Harvard families pay an average of only \$12,000 per year.
- Families earning more than \$150,000 may still qualify for financial aid.

Source: <http://college.harvard.edu/admissions/choosing-harvard/affordability>

2. MERIT-BASED AID

Another form of aid is merit-based, which is when financial assistance is awarded to an applicant based on a particular skill, talent or achievement. Merit-Based aid can come in many forms, such as a full scholarship covering the main costs of attendance (also known as a 'full ride'), a tuition fee credit, or a specific amount. Many colleges offer this, but the Ivy League universities do not (they just offer need-based aid).

Merit-based scholarships are of course very competitive. Some are as simple as a set amount (up to \$15,000) for being at the top of the academic intake, while others might be a 'full ride' for students who not only excel academically but have also shown excellence in another area, demonstrating qualities such as leadership, or community contribution.

To apply, students should check the requirements with the college, as extra information might need to be submitted.

Some examples of some of the best full-ride merit scholarships are:

- Morehead-Cain Scholarship, University of North Carolina www.moreheadcain.org
- Jefferson Scholarship, University of Virginia www.jeffersonscholars.org
- Robertson Scholarship, Duke University www.robertsonscholars.org

These colleges are renowned for their generous full-ride scholarships:

- Brandeis (MA)
- Georgetown (DC)
- Marquette (WI)
- University of North Carolina (NC)
- Northeastern (MA)
- Vanderbilt (TN)
- Washington University (St Louis, MO)

Colleges that offer financial aid to international students

There are also hundreds of colleges outside of the famous names that will gladly offer international students financial aid, even if they're not the very top student. Colleges such as Nazareth College (NY) last year awarded financial aid to *every single one* of its admitted undergraduates, which included all their international students.

Listing all colleges that students should consider is difficult, and it seems like a cop-out to tell students to research every single college's website. Fortunately, there is a very useful searchable list updated by Jennie Kent Jeff Levy, here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18gFfG8Kmlu7lqnY1Za0thcxyq32m10MqeYQj2nlfsmg/>



3. SPORTS SCHOLARSHIPS

Many US colleges give significant funding to students they wish to recruit for their teams. These places are very competitive, but are in a very wide-range of sports. Some American college coaches are actively recruiting some sports that you might consider 'British', such as rugby! Funding levels vary and depend on how good a student is at their chosen sport. International-level players in popular sports can expect to get full-rides, whereas national players might get 50%, depending on the sport. Niche sports, like fencing, are much more difficult to receive funding for, but it is possible.

The process for applying for sports scholarships is different to a normal application: students first approach coaches of college teams, who then make a decision on funding. If accepted, the college will then specify the academic requirements. This is important: students still need to perform academically, and often the level of funding will be tied to standardised test scores!

It is unusual for students to attempt this process on their own, as the wrong coach or the wrong communication can easily ruin their chances of funding. Instead, most students engage a sports scholarship agency, who will help promote them to the relevant coaches. These agents will quickly tell a student whether they have a chance. If so, they are worth the cost, because they will ensure the best outcome in terms of funding! We recommend the consultancy Sporting Elite USA (rob.thomas@sportingeliteusa.com) who have a good track record and will be honest about a student's chances. The exception to this is for sports such as swimming, where it is very easy to tell what your level is. Judging achievement in team-based sports is much more subtle.

The important thing is that students start thinking about this early – ideally in Year 11 – so that they are on the coaches' radars. There are strict rules in place governing how and when coaches can make contact: see the NCAA website www.ncaa.com for details. Students should also be aware that different colleges are in different divisions for different sports, and these attract different levels of funding and academic requirements.

A coach may make contact with the student in advance of a decision, which is a good sign that their application is progressing well. The coach will be looking for a firm decision from the student.

Note that sports scholars generally must take the SAT or ACT, and while the required scores are not as high as for academic applications, the better the score the more opportunities for funding they will have.

Note also that Ivy League colleges **do not** offer sports scholarships as such. However, good players will be highly sought after, and can influence the admissions officers' decision, as coaches will want those students.

There is a comprehensive guide to Sports Scholarships on the Fulbright Commission's website: www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa/undergraduate/educationusa-advice/funding/sports-scholarships

4. OTHER FORMS OF FUNDING

Niche scholarships – For students with a particular talent, such as music.

Private Loans – Not advisable! **US Federal loans** – for US citizens.

External scholarships – Some companies offer scholarships in return for working

Military/other scholarships – US citizens can gain finance via AmeriCorps, PeaceCorp, or Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Working on campus – for up to 20 hours per week.



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This timeline outlines what students and teachers should do and when in order to apply to a US college. The items on the list are then explained in detail later.

Time	Student	School
Years 11-13	Personal development – involvement in enriching activities and interests	Encourage personal development
End of Year 11		Information session at school on US colleges
End of Year 11		Plan autumn prep course
Summer before Year 12	Register for SAT/ACT if possible	
Beginning of Year 12		Emails to parents and students regarding tests
Beginning of Year 12		Information session at school on tests and applications
Beginning Year 12	Choose standardised test (SAT/ACT)	Offer advice on test choice
Beginning Year 12	Register for tests (SAT/ACT)	Prompt to register for tests
Autumn Year 12	Prepare for SAT/ACT	Run preparation course for SAT/ACT
Winter Year 12	Take first SAT/ACT	
Winter-Spring Year 12	Prepare for SAT/ACT	Optional time to run a preparation course
Easter Year 12	Visit colleges (could also do in the summer, and virtually)	
Spring Year 12	Take second/third SAT/ACT	
Summer before Year 13	Continue personal development	Ensure students are keeping up activities/interests
July before Year 13	Register for tests (if needed)	Prompt to register for tests
Summer before Year 13	Take final SAT/ACT	Run catch-up course for the SAT/ACT
Summer	Visit colleges (if not done earlier)	
September Year 13	Register for the Common App	Prompt students to register
September Year 13	Investigate funding options	Ensure families understand funding options
September Year 13	Decide on colleges	
September Year 13	List requirements for applications	
Autumn Year 13	Take final SAT/ACT if required	
Autumn Year 13	Write application essays	Offer advice on application essays
Autumn Year 13	Ask teachers for references	Write references
October Year 13	Ask teachers for transcripts	Compile transcripts
October Year 13	Submit Early Decision / Early Action	Prompt students to submit and submit references, transcripts, and ED agreement
November Year 13	Submit UT/UC applications	
December Year 13	Receive Early Apps Decision	
December Year 13	Submit final Regular applications	Submit all references and transcripts
February Year 13		Submit Mid-Term Report
March-April Year 13	Receive Regular Apps Decision	
May Year 13	Decide on college and pay deposit	
May Year 13		Submit Final Report



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The standardised tests – the SAT and ACT – are the single most time-consuming part of an application to the US. For this reason, you’d be forgiven for thinking they are the most important, but this isn’t really the case. They are used by colleges as a way of filtering out applicants early on – some colleges, like NYU, have over 100,000 applicants every year. They couldn’t possibly read every application carefully, so instead they eliminate those applicants who score below a certain threshold in the standardised tests.

1. The SAT and ACT

There are two main entrance tests: the SAT and the ACT. Students choose one of these tests to take. These tests are run by rival companies, but **both are equally accepted** by all colleges in the USA (with one exception – Curtis Institute of Music, PA, which only accepts SAT). The tests are broadly similar: both contain English, reading, maths, and data analysis questions, and the ACT has an optional essay. Both tests take around three hours to complete without the essay, are almost entirely multiple choice, and are very time pressured. They require practice. Lots of it!

The ACT is scored on four sections: English, Math, Reading, and Science. Students receive raw scores for each section, which are then scaled to a score out of 36. These are then averaged to get a Composite Score out of 36. The essay is marked separately, out of 12. Students applying to Ivy League colleges should aim for a score of about 32+ on each section and 9+ on the essay.

Note that the Science section is not really science: it’s data interpretation, which the SAT also has. Students are *not* expected to have any academic knowledge of science.

The SAT is scored on two sections: Evidence-based Reading and Writing, and Math. Students receive raw scores for each section, which are then scaled to a score out of 800. These are then added to get a total score out of 1600. The essay is marked separately, out of 24. Students applying to Ivy League colleges should aim for a score of about 720 on each section, and 18+ on the essay.

The main differences are between the tests are:

	ACT	SAT
Time per question	49 seconds	70 seconds
Math	Broader syllabus Easier to learn Calculator allowed	Narrower syllabus Focus on ability Non-calc section
Reading	Focus on speed Not much inference Predictable sources	Focus on depth More inference Foundational documents and rights
Data Analysis	‘Science’ section	Within Math and English sections
Essay	Debate style	No essay
Medium	Computer	Paper

To decide between tests, students should take a **diagnostic test**, such as our free one available here: www.ueseducation.com/diagnostic

The **ACT essay is optional**. Since the SAT essay has been removed (as of May 2021) very few colleges now require or even care about the ACT essay, but we normally recommend taking it anyway just in case, as some scholarships may depend on it, and some universities in other countries also require it.



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Most colleges publish statistics from the previous year. For example, here are some selected colleges' percentiles for the class of 2024:

College	SAT		ACT	
	25 th	75 th	25 th	75 th
MIT	1510	1580	34	36
WashU	1450	1560	33	35
Tulane	1430	1530	31	34
Haverford	1380	1540	32	34
Boulder (Engineering)	1330	1490	30	34
IU Bloomington	1200	1400	27	32

These figures mean that, for example, the lower 25% of successful applicants to Haverford got less than 32 (overall) on the ACT, the middle 50% got a score between 32 and 34, and the upper 25% got at least 34. This means that to be in with a good shot, students want to be somewhere in the top 75% – around the 32 mark. On the SAT, they would need a score in the region of 1380. If the score is lower than this, colleges may question a student's academic ability, and their application will be considered with this in mind. If the score is too low, it won't be considered at all. (Unless they have something else very special going for them, such as sports.)

If a student does very well on these tests, the college won't worry about the test scores anymore and will just look at the rest of the application.

In summary: Test scores are not the be all and end all, but students should aim to get a good enough score not to cause concern. There is no point, however, in aiming for extremely high or perfect scores: admissions officers aren't impressed with scores beyond a certain level, and in fact there is an argument to say they don't like perfect scores, because it makes them question whether the student had anything better to do with his or her time!

2. ACT – Computer-Based Testing

The ACT (outside of the US) is taken on computer at a specialist test centre. Students who have **accommodations** (extra time) will normally have to take the test on paper in school. In the US the test is still on paper.

3. Digital SAT

From March 2023 (March 2024 in the US), the SAT will be changing to a shorter, digital format. The scoring will be the same, but the changes are:

- Taken on a student's own laptop, in a school test centre.
- Shorter questions with less focus on reading long passages.
- Adaptive by section (the second section of English will be determined by the score on the first section, and the same for the Maths.)

This is likely to result in a lot of questions and anxiety, but the simplest advice is:

Students starting preparation in autumn 2022: should consider the ACT. Very strong students could prepare for the SAT, and should take it in December 2022.

Students starting preparation in winter 2022-23: should take the diagnostic, and if doing SAT, should aim for their first SAT in March 2023.

Students should always start as early as possible! Studying for the current SAT will still prepare them for the content they need and put them at an advantage over students who start later. Our blog on the Digital SAT:

ueseducation.com/blog/choosing-between-the-new-digital-sat-and-the-act



4. Do students have to take these tests?

The Coronavirus pandemic resulted in many test cancellations, and therefore the majority of US colleges became 'test-optional'; this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. But even before this, there were many test-optional colleges as well as some that were test-blind or test-flexible; that is, they don't require standardised test scores as part of the application.

Test-optional colleges will look at test scores if they are submitted, but they are not required. *Test-blind* colleges will not look at them even if submitted. *Test-flexible* means that other tests (eg IB) may be submitted in lieu of the SAT/ACT.

This means that students need to think about whether submitting test scores will put them at an advantage or a disadvantage in the context of their overall application. They should only submit test scores if:

- 1) The scores are on par with their other academic credentials, like predicted grades; and
- 2) The scores are in line with the levels that colleges would normally expect, as per the information above.

It should still be pointed out that since 'test-optional' colleges will look at scores if they are submitted, there is an obvious conclusion: if all else is equal, submitting good scores will help an application.

Students might also be applying to colleges, programs or scholarships where tests are required, so they should not assume they don't have to do them.

To summarise, students should always start the process assuming that they will have to do the tests, and leave plenty of time to do them, (approximately one year). If they subsequently realise they cannot get good enough scores, or need to focus on other elements, such as a portfolio, they might choose not to submit scores to test-optional colleges.

5. Registering for the tests

Students should register for the international ACT here: <https://my.act.org>

And for the SAT here:

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/register/international>

Note that registration for the academic year opens in July, and students should register shortly after that for all the test dates they need so as not to miss out on a place at their local test centre, or at all. It's not unusual for students to have to travel a very long way to take the test if they don't register in time, and test dates quickly become full. Encourage students to register at least several months in advance.

Wait-listing: if a student has missed the registration deadline, they can enter the wait list. However, it's very unlikely that they will be given a place, so they should start thinking of alternative solutions, such as other test dates.

Tests cost around \$100-\$150 each to take.



6. Test Centre Locations

There are test centres all over the country, but these are the ones around London:

SAT:

- **Southbank International School**, London
- **University College School**, London
- **International School of London**
- **Whitgift School**, London
- **ACS Hillingdon**, Middlesex
- **Wellington College**, Berkshire
- **ACS Cobham**, Surrey
- **ACS Egham**, Surrey
- **The American School in London** (only for ASL students)

ACT:

When registering, students will have to search by town. There are several versions for London, which can be quite confusing:

Search "LONDON":

- **Intech Centre (British Council)**, Essex Road, Islington, N1 3PD
- **Computer Learning Centre**, 65 Kingley Road, Hounslow, TW3 1QB
- **Iranian Association**, 222 King Street, Hammersmith, W6 0RA
- **Kingsdale Foundation School**, Alleyn Park, Dulwich, SE21 8SQ

Search "London":

- **M2M Exams Co, Ltd**, Paxton House, 30 Artillery Lane, Bishopsgate, E1 7LS

Search "Hounslow":

- **ITTS London**, Unit 1, 694-712 London Road, Hounslow, TW3 1PG

Search "Croydon":

- **PSI**, Grosvenor House, 8th Floor, 125 High Street, Croydon, CR0 9XP

Search "Ilford":

- **PSI**, 2 Caxton Place (off Roden Street), 2nd Floor, Ilford, IG1 2AH

Search "Lewisham":

- **PDA Training**, 107-109 Lewisham High Street, Lewisham, SE13 6AT

Search "Watford":

- **Computer Training Portal**, Victoria House, 45-47 Vicarage Road, WD18 0DE

Search "Thorpe":

- **TASIS**, Ten Acre Lane, Magna Carta Hall Reception, Thorpe, Surrey, TW20 8TE



7. When to take the tests

Students should aim to take the tests according to the ideal timeline, above.

- The **ACT** is held on Friday and Saturday mornings and afternoons in the following months internationally:
September, October, December, February, April, June, and July
- The **SAT** is held in the following months internationally (on different days to the ACT):
October, December, March, May, and August

For up-to-date ACT dates, see here: www.ueseducation.com/ACT-dates

For up-to-date SAT dates, see here: www.ueseducation.com/SAT-dates

It is quite normal to take tests two or three times! Four times starts to look a bit strange – colleges would rather see students doing something more productive with their time.

Students should have completed all their tests by the time they submit their application, which is normally Christmas in Year 13. This means their last chance for the ACT or SAT is December of Year 13. Ideally students will have completed these much earlier!

If students are applying Early Decision/Action (see later in this guide), their last chance is October for the ACT and SAT.

Note: It is possible to submit an application in December, and still take the SAT or ACT in December. Scores will have to be submitted directly to the colleges by nominating them through the College Board/ACT site. The same goes for early applications: if students apply early, they can still take the tests in October.

8. Receiving scores

Scores come out 48 hours after students take the ACT (the essay takes 10 days), and 13 days after the SAT.

Warning: students are often prompted to send ‘free score reports’ to their colleges, but they should not do this until they are ready to apply, otherwise they might end up sending scores they don’t want to be seen!

9. How to submit scores

When they’re ready to apply, students should submit scores to colleges through the respective online portals for the ACT and SAT. There, students can specify which scores to send to which colleges. They can do this before taking a test, or afterwards, but as per above, should normally do this once they know their scores and are sure they want them to be seen.

Some colleges require all scores to be submitted; some just want to see the best test. Some colleges do something called ‘Superscoring’, in which they take the best score from different sections of different tests to create one overall best score. This is up to the college!

Many colleges will also allow students to self-report scores in the Common App or other, in lieu of seeing their official scores later.

Scores should not appear on the school’s transcript of grades.



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10. How to prepare

It can't be emphasised enough that students **must prepare properly** for all of these tests. It is impossible to cram for them; students need to practise little and often.

It's also vital that students sit proper mock tests marked by professionals. UES offers plenty of mock tests (including CBT ACT); see here:

www.ueseducation.com/mock-tests

It is quite normal for students to get either private tuition in these tests, or to take part in group courses. Most private schools either offer courses on site, or recommend tutoring agencies. We work with a large number of these schools, and we're always willing to help.

We also run our own courses, both weekly and intensively in the holidays. See here for the latest courses, and speak to us if you would like a discount for your students: <https://www.ueseducation.com/courses>

11. Accommodations

If a student receives extra time in exams at school, or can use a laptop, they may be entitled to similar allowances on the SAT and ACT. The student must apply online through the College Board and/or the ACT for 'accommodations' at least eight weeks before the test, and their school will have to supply evidence.

If entitled to extra time, the student will receive either 50%, 100%, or 200% extra time, making it a very long test indeed! In some cases, students will even be able to sit the test over several days, doing a section each day.

We have written an extensive guide for students and schools here:

www.ueseducation.com/blog/SAT-ACT-accommodations

To apply for accommodations, students should work with their school.

For the **ACT**, the accommodations process is as follows:

1. The student should follow this link and read the instructions and watch the helpful video: <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/registration/accommodations.html>
2. The student should then register for an ACT account here, stipulating that they wish to apply for accommodations: <https://my.act.org>
3. The student will have two options: **testing in school** or at a test centre. In the vast majority of cases, students will have to test in school, as test centres aren't able to cope with extra time. Choose the in-school option as a default.
4. The student will receive an email detailing what to send to the school. They must do this, so follow up with them if they haven't!
5. The school will receive instructions on how to apply for accommodations, and what evidence to submit.



For the **SAT**, the accommodations process is as follows:

1. The student and school should read about the process here: <https://www.collegeboard.org/students-with-disabilities/request-accommodations/approval-overview>
2. The school should then enrol here: <https://www.collegeboard.org/students-with-disabilities/ssd-online/get-access>
3. The student's parent should sign and submit to the school a consent form: <https://www.collegeboard.org/pdf/ssd/ssd-consent-form-accommodations.pdf>
4. The school then submits a request online here: <https://www.collegeboard.org/students-with-disabilities/ssd-online/submit-requests>
5. The student will receive a SSD code allowing them to register for the SAT and/or Subject Tests online.

Not all test centres are set up to cope with extra time, so it's important to find out where the student can take it. It is generally difficult for students to attend another school's test centre for accommodations. However, normally your school will be able to administer the test for your students who require accommodations.

For the ACT, accommodation tests will normally be **on paper in the school**.

Common errors/problems with accommodations:

- A student registers for a normal-time test first at a test centre, and subsequently finds it very difficult to have it swapped to extra-time.
- An ACT student initially chooses the 'test centre' option for accommodations, rather than the 'in-school' option. Since there are almost no ACT test centres that can cope with extra time, it results in a very long delay in trying to find a test centre or having the accommodations modified.
- An ACT student registers for an in-school test before agreeing with the school, and the school is reluctant to host the test. We strongly urge schools to be willing to host their own ACT students with accommodations, as it's (a) very simple, and (b) much less pressure on the student. No external students will be able to join.
- A student registers for accommodations too close to a test date. It's likely that without at least eight weeks' notice, they won't be able to take the test.
- A school submits all the evidence without an Educational Psychologist's report. Unless the Ed Psych report is written with US standardised tests in mind, it is likely that the accommodations won't be granted.
- A school finds that they are not listed when trying to apply for accommodations. Schools should make sure they are listed several weeks before they apply, and anyone reading this should apply now!

Request an ACT high school code:

<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/HighSchoolCodeRequestForm.pdf>

Request an SAT high school code:

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-code-list-services-order-form.pdf>



12. PSAT 10 and NMSQT

The PSAT, or Pre-SAT, is a test administered by the College Board aimed at students in years 11 and 12. It serves two functions:

1. To prepare younger students for the SAT;
2. To allow students to apply for the National Merit Scholarship Programme.

The latter is only relevant to American citizens: if a student is American, and can score extremely highly on the PSAT, they could qualify for a state-funded scholarship for college.

Some schools choose to make their students sit the PSAT in Year 11 to help them get ready for the SAT. However, this is now less common given the shift to the ACT.

There are thus two versions of the test: the **PSAT 10** for those in Year 11, and the **PSAT/NMSQT** for those in Years 11 or 12 who wish to apply for the NMSP. The PSAT is almost always administered by the student's school and must be held between February and April for the PSAT 10, and on a date in October for the NMSQT.

For more information, see here: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/psat-nmsqt-psat-10>

13. Pre-ACT

There is also a Pre-ACT, which some international schools are choosing to administer in Grade 10 instead of the PSAT. Read more about it here: <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/preact.html>

14. AP tests

In America, and at many international schools, it's common for students to take AP (Advance Placement) tests, either as part of their curriculum or in addition to it. These tests are taught over a semester, and count as credit towards university degrees in the US. They also help to prove academic ability in applications.

Any student can take AP tests. They will have (a) find somewhere that will teach it (possibly online, via private tuition, or at a local international school if they're very lucky), and (b) find somewhere to sit the exam – usually at an international school. However, they must register in time. The school will have to register the student by mid-November for any exams that academic year!

Students can find a local school here: <https://apcourseaudit.inflexion.org/ledger/>

They can read more about registering here: <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/register-for-ap-exams>

We generally don't recommend students take APs if their a school doesn't offer them. Instead, students should focus on their school grades, and take an additional A-Level if possible! However, APs can be useful for showing a broad-range of skills, for getting university credit, or for making up gaps in maths/languages.



CHOOSING COLLEGES

Students can apply to as many or as few of the 2400 US colleges as they like! Most choose 8-10 colleges, because the more they choose, the more work they will have to do, as each application will require careful planning and separate essays.

Students should make a shortlist of colleges and group them into three categories: **'Safe'**, **'Match'**, and **'Reach'**. 'Safe' are those that he/she knows they will almost certainly be admitted to; 'Match' colleges are those that fit the student's profile, but will require good effort to be accepted to; and 'Reach' colleges are those that are achievable if everything goes right, but might have low acceptance rates.

It's extremely important that schools encourage students to look beyond the Ivies and other big names and consider the vast number of excellent universities to choose from. If they just apply to a few very famous ones, they might quite easily be rejected by all of them, and miss out on a chance to study abroad.

With so many colleges to choose from, it can seem a daunting task. However, with good research and guidance, it is manageable. Students should be encouraged to read some of the following (and it's worth schools getting copies for students to borrow):

- **Uni in the USA: the definitive guide to Universities in the USA**
- **The Princeton Review, Best 379 Colleges**
- **Fiske Guide to Colleges**
- bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search
- www.niche.com/colleges/
- www.noodle.com/colleges

There are several criteria that can be used to reduce the options:

1. Cost

The first consideration must always be affordability. There is a lot of money available, but in the end students should only apply if they can afford to attend.

2. Rankings

The most obvious place to start is by looking at league tables. Bear in mind, however, that the top 20 universities in the UK are comparable to about the top 50 in the USA!

The **Ivy League** universities are: Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, UPenn, and Yale. But the Ivies are not always the best. The Ivy League was originally a north-eastern sports league, and those colleges are now often outranked by many others!

US News and Times Higher Education have famous rankings, but students should consider alternative rankings such as:

Affordable Elites: washingtonmonthly.com/2019college-guide/affordable-elites

Most innovative: www.collegeconsensus.com/rankings/most-innovative-colleges/

Students should also consider ranking by subject – it might surprise them!



3. Admit Rates

The highest ranked tend to be the most competitive. Some (like Stanford) have acceptance rates of just 2%. It's not a good idea to apply to too many of these.

4. Size

Does the student want to be part of a very large student body of tens of thousands (like UCLA), or in a smaller close-knit college where they will know most people? Do they want to have huge lectures, or smaller seminars?

5. Course Structure

Although students will in general be studying Liberal Arts, which will include a wide range of subjects as well as specialisations, there is lots of variation in structure between colleges. Some are much more open than others (Brown, famously, allows students a lot of freedom to choose), whereas others are much more restrictive in terms of what students can choose.

Bear in mind that even supposed specialist colleges are often much broader in subject area than people imagine. For example, MIT requires students to spend 50% of each year studying humanities and social sciences. They also require a reference from a humanities teacher. Students studying just maths and science A-Levels are unlikely to be a good fit for MIT.

See here for a full description: ueseducation.com/blog/college-curricula

6. Liberal Arts Colleges

Liberal Arts colleges are undergraduate-only and tend to be smaller, with higher teacher-student ratios. The quality of teaching at such places is very high. However, these colleges are not always international students' first choices because they haven't heard of them, or they worry that the lack of postgraduate courses or research makes them less 'good'. In fact, they are considered some of the best places to study in the US. As evidence, the majority of top CEOs studied at a Liberal Arts college before going on to Business School elsewhere, and the majority of PhD students at research universities earned their undergraduate degrees at a Liberal Arts college. Their aim is to train people to think critically and to instil a desire for learning.

Read more here: ueseducation.com/blog/what-are-liberal-arts-colleges

7. Values and Philosophy

It's important for students to appreciate the different outlooks that colleges have. One way to determine this is through their stated values and mission statements. Speaking to former and current students is also important, as are reading reviews and visiting the colleges.

8. Majors and Research

Whilst students will generally apply for Liberal Arts, they might have an idea of the sorts of subjects they're most interested in and might want to major in. In this case, they should consider universities that have a strong tradition in that area, have the world's leading professors, and carry out research in those areas.



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9. Sports

Sports are a big part of university in the US, and students have the opportunity to play at all levels. If there are certain sports they really want to play or watch, they should seek out those colleges!

10. Climate and Location

Climate varies wildly in the US. Before applying, they should think about whether they can stand the cold of the north or the heat of the south! Furthermore, do they want desert, mountains, cities, or rolling green hills? Do they want a big, open campus or a busy urban lifestyle?

11. Student Life

Students should think about whether they see themselves fitting into the student life at different colleges. For example, Princeton has an Eating Club tradition, clubs that revolve around eating meals together. In other universities the Greek system is still active, though not necessarily like in the movies!

12. Religion

If religion is important to a student, they could seek out universities with a religious affiliation, or which have a strong tradition in that religion. For example, BYU in Utah is predominantly Mormon (though you don't have to be a Mormon to attend).

Some extremely good, non-ivy colleges:

Bowdoin, New Brunswick, Maine www.bowdoin.edu/
 Brandeis, Waltham, Massachusetts www.brandeis.edu/
 Bryn Mawr, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania www.brynmawr.edu/
 Carleton, Northfield, Minnesota www.carleton.edu/
 Colby, Waterville, Maine www.colby.edu/
 Denison, Granville, Ohio www.denison.edu/
 Emerson, Boston, Massachusetts www.emerson.edu/
 Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, www.fsu.edu/
 Fordham, New York City www.fordham.edu/
 Grinnell, Grinnell, Iowa www.grinnell.edu/
 Hamilton, Clinton, New York, www.hamilton.edu/
 Haverford, Pennsylvania, www.haverford.edu/
 Marymount University, Arlington, Virginia www.marymount.edu/
 Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, www.northeastern.edu
 Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana www.nd.edu/
 Occidental, Los Angeles, California www.oxy.edu/
 Pomona (& Scripps & Claremont), California www.pomona.edu/
 San Diego, UC, California, www.ucsd.edu/
 Skidmore, Sarasota Springs, New York cms.skidmore.edu/
 St John's College, Annapolis, Maryland (and Santa Fe, New Mexico) www.sjc.edu/
 Swarthmore, Pennsylvania www.swarthmore.edu/
 Tufts, Medford, Massachusetts www.tufts.edu/
 Tulane, New Orleans, Louisiana tulane.edu/
 Vassar, Poughkeepsie, New York, www.vassar.edu/
 Virginia, University of, Charlottesville, www.virginia.edu/
 Wake Forest, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, www.wfu.edu/
 Wesleyan, Middletown, Connecticut, <http://www.wesleyan.co.uk/>
 William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, <http://www.wm.edu/>
 Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, <http://www.williamscollege.co.uk/>



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Unlike UCAS, there is no single portal for applying to college in the US. You may encounter one or more of these:

a. The Common App

Most colleges in America (900+) use what is known as the Common Application, or Common App for short. This online system allows students to supply colleges with what they require for an application. Colleges have different requirements and deadlines, and students should understand these carefully, and upload the necessary information through the Common App. www.commonapp.org

b. The Universities of California system (UC)

Any college with a UC in front of the name (UCLA, UC Berkeley etc) is part of this system, and students apply via the UC portal. The UC system is unique in that it does not require any input from the school, and students can apply to any number of the 14 campuses with a single application.

www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/undergrad_adm/apply_to_uc.html

c. MIT and Georgetown have their own application portals, which are very similar to the Common App

d. Coalition Application

This is rival to the Common App, aimed at getting students involved earlier. However, there are now no colleges that only use Coalition, so it is highly unlikely (and not recommended) that students will use this.

Whichever system students use, the process is fairly similar for students:

- 1) Register for the system in the summer before Year 13
- 2) Nominate teachers who will provide references and transcripts
- 3) Upload Common App essay and supplementary essays
- 4) Upload additional materials such as portfolios
- 5) List and write about their extracurricular activities
- 6) Pay Application fees
- 7) Submit it all

The Common App does a good job of walking students and teachers through the process, and there is help available here: <http://appsupport.commonapp.org/>

It is a good idea for teachers to explore the Common App system. You can create a mock student log-in here: <https://apply.commonapp.org/createaccount>. Choose 'Educational Professional' and follow the instructions to log in and see what the system looks like from a student's perspective.

However, there are common issues that UK and Channel Island schools face, which is more to do with the differences between school systems.

Nominated teachers and Guidance Counsellor

Students will nominate two teachers for recommendations, and one Guidance Counsellor responsible for uploading transcripts, etc. It is **highly recommended** that schools have a single person – the Guidance Counsellor – who will handle this, and who will advise other nominated teachers on how to write references. Make sure teachers are warned in advance – they will receive an email with instructions from the Common App as soon as the student nominates them!

Grade vs Year

UK Year 13 = US Grade 12 (Senior year). Just subtract one from the UK year!



GPA

In the US, high school students have continual assessments, which contribute to an ongoing Grade Point Average, an indicator of their overall attainment. Here, that is not the case. US colleges know this: they are not expecting a conversion of GCSEs and AS/IB scores into a GPA. Instead, they would like to see as much information as possible, through exams taken and predicted grades. This will be provided elsewhere, so students and teachers **MUST LEAVE THE GPA BOX BLANK!**

Transcript

A transcript is simply a list of exams taken (from GCSE onwards) and predicted grades. Transcripts should be one page long, be in PDF format, and include key details such as the key school contact for international applications, student full name and date of birth, subjects taken, examination boards, and predicted or actual grades. You may also want to include an official school stamp and signature. An example transcript is supplied at the back of this guide.

With the introduction of linear A-Levels, it's harder for students to show their current level when applying. If your school offers EPQs, or any other sort of official academic qualification, you should include these. If a student was at a different school for Years 10 or 11, you will need to contact the school to ask for an official transcript to be sent to you for inclusion, or ask the pupil to email an online copy of this to you for you to verify.

Important note on internal grades/mocks: Please do not include these, no matter what colleges email you asking for. These will generally only cause confusion and could be hugely detrimental, especially when you have to do it for students who have low internal grades but high predictions. If a college requests this, simply reply politely but firmly that the only grades you supply are official GCSEs and A-level predictions.

School Report

The Counsellor will be taken through steps to provide a School Report. There will be questions such as:

- **GPA:** leave blank
- **Class Rank:** state that you do not rank students
- **Block Scheduling:** UK schools **do not** tend to block schedule classes
- UK schools do not usually offer **AP courses**.

FERPA Release Authorization

When a student applies through the Common App, they will be asked whether they want to waive the right to see the letters of recommendation from their teachers and counsellor before they are sent to the colleges. It is vitally important that the student agree to this (known as Family and Educational Rights Privacy Act Release Authorization), because this give colleges confidence that they are honest and trustworthy recommendations. If a student submits an application without waiving their rights, it is possible to change this. You should contact the Common App as well as the college to which the student applied and explain the situation.

If a student or their family is adamant that they wish to see the recommendations, explain that you will be dutybound to tell the colleges.



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School Profile

The counsellor should upload a School Profile. This is a description of the school and should provide context so that the admissions officers understand what opportunities and challenges a student from the school has, and how normal it is for them to go to America (or even university). It should include the following:

- Official school logo/letterhead
- Website, contact name, phone/email/Fax
- CEEB code (if you have one)
- Type of school – inc. independent/state (public), selective/non-selective, co-ed/single-sex, secular/religious
- Accreditation eg CIS, ISC, HMC
- Curricula, and number of A-levels students normally take
- Distribution of A-Level or IB grades, and GCSE grades
- Breakdown of leavers' destinations
- Mission and school ethos
- Size, and demographics (including gender, citizenship, ethnicity)
- Number of free school meals/allowances/bursaries
- Town, surrounding, and community description

Note: The Universities of California expect schools to upload their profiles independently of students' applications. You can do so here: <https://hs-profile.ucop.edu/> An example School Profile is provided at the end of this guide.

Optional, Midterm, and Final Reports

There is an option for Guidance Counsellors to submit what is called an Optional Report. There is no need to fill this in when a student initially submits an application, but it is recommended to use this if there has been a change in a student's course load or grade prediction. Most Admissions Officers also want to be contacted by email in addition to the Optional Report.

Further down the line, by mid-February, the counsellor will have to submit a **Midterm Report**. In the US, students' grades are constantly changing throughout the year, so teachers would submit the most up to date grades at this point. In the UK, there will likely be no new grades to report, and it's therefore okay to submit the same transcript and predicted grades as before (if there have been no changes to predictions, or no new tests taken) along with a note explaining the system that your school follows. Colleges will understand this.

The **Final Report** is submitted in April/May once a student has been offered a place. Again, the same transcript and predictions can be submitted, unless there have been changes.

If the student's A-Level predictions have changed, it is important to be honest about this and state it on the reports and via email. Otherwise, the student may have their decision rescinded when the final results come out, and the school's integrity may be called into question.

Some colleges may also ask for a Final Transcript of results on A Level Results Day. US offers are not conditional on A-Level/IB results, but if a student's grades are below expectations it's wise to offer to speak to the Admissions Officer. If a student has fallen significantly short of their grades, it's possible the Admissions Committee may reconvene and put a student on academic probation or, in the worst-case scenario, rescind the place.

Note: no reminders are sent for submitting Midterm and Final reports!



Submission of Official Results

A point of confusion is after A-level/IB results day: who submits the actual results and how do they do so?

This differs from college to college. It is not possible to upload the results through the Common App, because it rolls over to the new academic year on 1st August. Instead, results need to be emailed or posted to some colleges, or simply hand-delivered by the student when they arrive on campus. Watch out for emails from the college or the student over the summer!

Disciplinary Section

Previously, schools were asked to note any disciplinary issues, like suspensions, that the student had received. This is no longer on the Common App, but colleges are still writing to schools to ask about this if they admit a student. It's important to have a policy in place as to what transgressions are notifiable, and to apply that policy universally.

Covid Disruption

This year, there is space in the School Profile to outline how COVID has disrupted students' education. It's a good idea to include a bulleted list including dates of the disruption, lessons or extracurriculars that were cancelled, and what measures were in place during lockdown. This should be standardised for all students; details of disruption to individual students over and above what their peers faced could be mentioned in the Counselor Letter of Recommendation and/or the COVID-19 question in the student section of the Common App.

Application Fees

There is usually a fee to apply to each college. These are set by each college and range from zero to \$90. These can be waived if the student applies for a fee waiver and submits the required evidence.



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The student must nominate one or more teachers and a counsellor to provide letters of recommendations. The nominated teachers should be prepared on how to write effective references for American colleges. Put simply, they should be honest, and not be too 'British' and understated. It's okay to be direct and effusive about how great a student is! It's also appropriate to discuss any concerns you may have about the student and support that they might need in place.

Teacher recommendations should be personal and subject-specific. Teachers should talk not just about a student's ability or grades, but his/her grasp of the nuances of the subject, attitude towards learning, and class contribution. It's a good idea to add both quantitative statements (eg Student X is among the top few Physics students in her peer group) with qualitative statements (eg Student Y's love of literature means that he has developed a sophisticated reading of texts beyond his years). There are some great examples of teacher references – and a breakdown of why they're effective – in a resource here:

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/4-amazing-recommendation-letter-samples>

Counsellor recommendations should provide a broader overview and add more colour and context. They can talk about a student's development and contribution to the life of the school, as well as giving biographical information about the student where appropriate. The counsellor should be a champion of the student's qualities, and reflect the student in the best possible light, without shying away from any academic or pastoral concerns. Admissions committees want to see that counsellors and teachers are enthusiastic about students and get a sense of what they would contribute to college, both academically and otherwise. If they represent a full and honest picture of a student, the praise is more likely to be believed.

The Guidance Counsellor has the option to supply a third reference called an Evaluation Letter – this is a good idea! This should be broader and less subject-specific.

Some colleges also allow room for Optional Letters of recommendation. While additional letters of recommendation should be used sparingly, it may be appropriate to include a recommendation letter from a significant volunteer or internship opportunity. At colleges with a more religious ethos such as the University of Notre Dame or Boston College, it may be appropriate to include a letter of recommendation from a member of clergy.

All letters should take into consideration what the universities are looking for in an applicant.

It's not just teachers who need guidance on letters of recommendation. Students also need advice on how to approach their teachers. It's a good idea for students to write a brief resume or summary of their achievements to remind teachers of their accomplishments - some schools even write a template for this. Students should also choose teachers who know them the best, not necessarily the ones in whose classes they have achieved the highest grades. There is a good resource in the Big Future section of the College Board website that gives some excellent tips for students approaching teachers for recommendation letters:

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/your-high-school-record/how-to-get-a-great-letter-of-recommendation>

We have also written about Letters of Recommendation here:

www.ueseducation.com/blog/college-references



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Students' college essays are one of the most important (and underrated) aspects of their applications. They are often the final part of an application that an Admissions Officer will read before making his or her decision about an applicant, and they provide an invaluable opportunity to showcase a student's personality and convince the decision-maker that the student would make a great undergraduate at their institution.

As part of the Common App, students will have seven standard essay prompts to choose between. Additionally, colleges may each ask for three or more essays, usually between 150-500 words each, on topics of the colleges' choice. Multiply this by ten applications, which is probably a typical number, and you see how quickly the workload can build up. For that reason, college essays should be written as far in advance of deadlines as possible. As teachers, you may want to set internal deadlines to help students manage the workload.

Other systems have their own version of the Common Application essay. The University of California Application asks students to respond to four Personal Insight Questions from eight prompts, and universities such as MIT, Georgetown, and Rutgers have their own bespoke application essay questions.

One of the biggest challenges for students who are accustomed to the UCAS system is the difference in style between the UCAS personal statement and the US college essay, particularly the Common Application essay. The UCAS statement requires a summary of the student's passion for their subject of choice, with a small section dedicated to their extracurricular activities. The Common Application essay, by contrast, invites a much more personal tone. Examples in recent years have included: 'Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea,' and 'Discuss an accomplishment or event that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood.' As you can see, the Common Application essay and other college essays do not ask students for a formal response, but rather a story to tell and an outlook on life to communicate. Students used to the British system will often find themselves a bit stumped as to how to tackle questions like these. At the outset of the process, they will often believe their lives unremarkable, and struggle for ideas. Key for advisors will be eliciting events from students' lives that can be shaped into a narrative, and helping them to find a voice that sounds authentically theirs. Students often tend to minimise their achievements, so advisors might need to think of creative ways to generate suitable material for students' essays.



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Sometimes difficult experiences can form the basis of excellent essays. Detailing how a student overcame adversity can show resilience, and even seemingly every day topics can be turned into compelling stories. Above all, the more personal to the student the essay is, the better it will come across. In recent years we've seen great essays on topics as diverse as sailing in the Swedish archipelago, flying an aeroplane for the first time, and baking cookies.

A good college essay has an arresting opening line that gets the reader's attention and makes them want to read on. Even a seemingly ordinary story can be engaging with the right sense of narrative, style, and structure. The **supplementary essays** for each college are slightly different in focus and style from the main Common Application essay. As you would expect, college essays tend to be much more focused on the institutions themselves. Colleges want to see students' interest in the institution and the programmes they offer, and are an opportunity for students to tailor their application to the values and culture of the college in question. Typical questions that institutions ask are 'How did you identify George Washington as a strong fit with your interests, talents, and goals' and 'NYU is global, urban, inspired, connected, and bold. What can NYU offer you, and what can you offer NYU?'

When answering supplementary essays, students should ensure they research each college thoroughly – looking at the key features of the programme, including the curriculum and electives; the ethos of the college and how it fits in with their own values; clubs and societies that might interest them; and other opportunities that they might want to access as undergraduates. Although a more formal tone might be more appropriate, students should ensure that they don't lose the personal voice and sense of enthusiasm that characterise the Common Application essay.

Colleges with their own bespoke application systems will ask for essays along the same lines of either the Common App essay or supplementary essays.

We have a guide on the Common App essay here:
ueseducation.com/blog/common-application-essay

and on the Supplemental Essays here:
ueseducation.com/blog/supplemental-essays



EARLY APPLICATIONS

Whilst regular applications are submitted by 1st January, it is also possible to apply early (usually 1st November deadline) to some Colleges. Early Action and Early Decision applications allow students to apply early and to receive decisions well before the usual 1st April decision date – usually by January. The advantage is that the acceptance rates are higher for people who apply early; colleges see it as a sign that students are motivated, organised, and keen to attend that college. Statistically, the advantage can be large: at Johns Hopkins, for example, the Regular Decision acceptance rate is 10%, whereas for Early Decision it is 30%. Claremont McKenna filled 68% of its class via Early Decision last year.

7.1 Early Decision

Students can (normally) choose **just one** university to apply to for Early Decision. This means that students apply early, but if they are offered a place it is **binding**, which means they must withdraw all other applications. Officially this includes UK and European Universities (that was the agreement when they applied!) but in reality they can't prevent a student accepting, then subsequently going to a UK university. However, this is **NOT** recommended: it is not only lacking in integrity, but will likely blacklist the student and his/her siblings from ever applying to the US again, and severely damage the reputation of the school. Do not let your students do this – they must be 100% sure that this college is the one they really want.

Students have until 1st May to accept or reject this offer. If they don't get accepted at Early Decision, they can continue applying to other colleges via Regular Decision.

7.2 Early Action

This means students apply early to one or more colleges and receive offers early, but they are non-binding. Students may continue applying for other colleges, and have until 1st May to accept or reject any offers. Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, and MIT offer a **Single Choice Early Action** programme. Students can only apply to one of these colleges through the SCEA programme.

7.3 ED II

Some colleges offer a second round of Early Decision. This has the same deadline as Regular Decision, but the decision will arrive in February, and is still binding. This gives students a second shot at Early Decision (for a different college).

7.4 Applying to more than one college early

Note that students can only apply to one college for Early Decision. Some colleges will allow students to apply to theirs for Early Decision and to others for Early Action; others won't. Some will let students apply to them for Early Action and to others for Early Decision or Early Action; others won't. Some do only Early Action; and some don't allow any early applications! Students should check with colleges for current regulations.

However, students should choose their colleges first, and then make early applications based on their requirements, rather than the other way around.

7.5 Deferral to Regular Decision

If a student applies Early, there is a chance that they will be deferred to Regular Decision. This is not necessarily a bad thing – it simply means the college thinks they're not quite good enough in the (very tough) pool of early applicants, but might be good enough in the general pool, and want to wait and see. However, students should be aware that the chances of getting accepted after a deferral are quite slim. To improve their chances, they should write to the college and explain that they still very much want to attend, and inform them of any achievements or improvements that have occurred since their application.



WAIT-LISTING

On 1st April, students are normally either offered a place at a college or rejected. Occasionally, however, students are wait-listed by one or more colleges. This means that the college wants to wait and see what their final cohort looks like before offering a place.

This can be disheartening, but it is not the end! Students must use this opportunity to tell the college that they really do want to go there. They can do this by going to the Common App or college website and uploading additional information in the form of a letter of enthusiasm. This letter should emphasise that he/she is very keen on that college and would accept an offer from them above any other college. They should also describe how they have progressed in school and in extracurricular activities since their initial application. It should not boast, but be direct, honest and passionate. This will dramatically increase a student's chances of being accepted, though they will have to wait until May to find out. May is when they must decide on other colleges, so they will receive a decision from the wait-listing college before then.

If a student is subsequently rejected, there is no harm in waiting until the next year and reapplying, if that's what they really want. They should of course assess where they could improve their application.

A full guide on wait-listing is here:

ueseducation.com/blog/what-is-waitlisting-and-what-to-do-if-waitlisted

DECISIONS

If applying Early, students will find out the college's decision by mid-December. If applying Regular Decision (or if deferred), they will get an offer or rejection (or wait-listing notice) on 1st April. They then have until 1st May to choose which offer to accept.

DEFERRALS AND GAP YEARS

It is generally not possible to defer an offer of a place to a later year. The student will have to reapply the following year. However, there are some colleges that do allow deferrals and encourage gap years, although these need to be requested in writing.

If a student wishes to take a gap year, he/she should therefore apply by the Christmas of their gap year.

Gap years are not looked down upon by colleges. However, students should make sure they are doing something worthwhile in their year off – something that sets them apart and helps them develop as a person.



PROMOTING THE US AND ENCOURAGING FOLLOW THROUGH

The process of applying to America for college can seem very daunting, but with a range of talks, courses, workshops and other events, it is possible to take students from a position of interest to one of excitement, motivation and direction.

Some ideas and suggestions are:

- General Higher Education fairs to which a range of US colleges are invited
- Dedicated US, North American, or International fairs
- US college evenings with speakers on a range of topics
- Panel events
- Compulsory lunchtime talks
- Quick talks or drop-ins from college reps
- Mock admissions events
- Essay workshops
- SAT/ACT courses
- SAT/ACT drop-in sessions
- SAT Subject Test courses
- Extra math help from teachers for ACT students
- Pre-course talks
- In-house US advisors
- Take groups to Fulbright College Day
- Attend Fulbright seminars
- Arrange tours of US colleges
- Go on counsellor fly-ins
- Become members of the International ACAC



This whole application process is complicated, but manageable. The things that schools can do to help students and improve their opportunities and chances of being accepted can be summarised as follows:

1) Promote

Talks, lectures, presentations, information sessions, and newsletters/emails should be held/sent to students and families throughout the year from the end of Year 11. This will encourage interest and get students preparing early.

2) Nurture

Students need to be encouraged to think about the activities they take part in from an early age (Year 10/11) so that they can show this on their CVs. This isn't just good for US colleges – it's good for life!

3) Help

Some students manage on their own, but most do not and are put off early on. With the right help and support, however, students can get through this. We see this happening at schools all over the UK and Europe, where schools that offer good help see increasing numbers of students applying.

4) Push

Because it's complicated, it's easy for students to give up. They need to be pushed and encouraged to keep going.

5) Dedicated teachers

Schools should nominate one teacher (or even full-time coordinator) to oversee the US process, and should allow them time to become familiar with every aspect of it. They are the link between the school and global universities, and through them schools can and will become internationally recognised.

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

Key Contact: Simon Lewis, Head of International University Applications
Email: sel@latymer-upper.org

Student Name: Curtis McAndrew **Date of Birth:** 10th January 2002

YEARS 10-II (EQUIVALENT TO GRADES 9-10) – EXAMINATION RESULTS

Board	Exam	Subject	Grade	Scale	Date Awarded
CAIE	IGCSE	English Language	8	9-1	Aug 2019
CAIE	IGCSE	English Literature	8	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	Mathematics	9	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	Biology	8	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	Chemistry	8	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	Physics	7	9-1	Aug 2019
CAIE	IGCSE	Music	9	9-1	Aug 2019
CAIE	IGCSE	History	8	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	Geography	6	9-1	Aug 2019
Edexcel	IGCSE	French	7	9-1	Aug 2019
Internal	Certificate	World Perspectives	Merit	See below*	Aug 2018


The Latymer World Perspectives Certificate has been externally accredited and accorded the value of a GCSE by UCAS Grading: Distinction = A , Merit = A, Pass = B/C

A concordance table between the numerical and grade letter grading systems for GCSEs and IGCSEs can be found [here](#).

YEARS 12-13 (EQUIVALENT TO GRADES 11-12) PUBLIC EXAMINATION PREDICTIONS

Board	Exam	Subject	Grade	Results Day
OCR	A Level	Chemistry	A*	Aug 19 th 2021
OCR	A Level	Mathematics	A	Aug 19 th 2021
OCR	AS Level	Spanish	B	Aug 19 th 2021
CIE	Pre-U	Philosophy and Theology	D2	Aug 19 th 2021

Concordance tables between Pre-U and A Level grades can be found [here](#).

<p>School stamp of Certification</p>  <p>LATYMER Latymer Upper School King Street London W6 9LR</p>	<p>Signed.....</p> <p>Full Name.....</p> <p>Role.....</p> <p>Date.....</p>
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School Letterhead Here

SCHOOL PROFILE

School Information

School Name:

Address: Include a physical address if possible, rather than a post office box.

CEEB Code: If your school has a CEEB code, list it. If not, write N/A. Note it is not necessary to have a CEEB code. This is a number that helps identify universities and schools (primarily in the US) for the purposes of applications and admissions tests. You can find out more information about CEEB codes at: <http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-code-search>.

School Website:

Contact Name and Title: List the contact most appropriate to discuss the student's application, most likely the person completing this form (ie the person acting as the student's counsellor on the Common Application).

Fax: +44 (0)...

Phone: +44 (0)...

Email:

Description of the School and Community

Type of School: Independent school, American school overseas, state-funded grammar school, state-funded school, state-funded academy (akin to US charter schools), comprehensive, etc.

School Mission:

Selective Admissions Policy: Yes/no and explain the selection process.

School Accreditation: How can the university confirm your school is accredited in the UK? Include your Department of Education number, UCAS number or other indicator.

Contextual Information about the School:

Please add any of the following postcode data:

- Number of students previously on Free School Meals
- Ethnicity of Student's Year Group by per cent
- Students on Educational Maintenance Allowance in 2011
- Co-ed/single gender
- Name of city and town and description of surroundings
- Community information (agriculture, business, diplomatic, rural, urban)
- Demographics of students attending the school (citizenship, gender, etc.)
- Secular vs. non-secular

Academics

Size of Graduating Class: Number of pupils in the student's year group.

Curricula Available & Participation Rate: For example: A-levels (85%), IB (15%)

Ranking: We do/do not provide students with a class rank. If your school does rank students, please rank the student (ie 2/100 pupils or the percentage, so he is in the top 10% of his year group).

Grading System & Distribution

A-Level Results	Percentage of Students Receiving Result UK-Wide Last Year (2011)	Percentage of Students Receiving Result at Our School Last Year
A*	8.2%	
A	18.8%	
B	25.6%	
C	23.6%	
D	15.1%	
E	6.5%	

Delete the following table if not applicable.

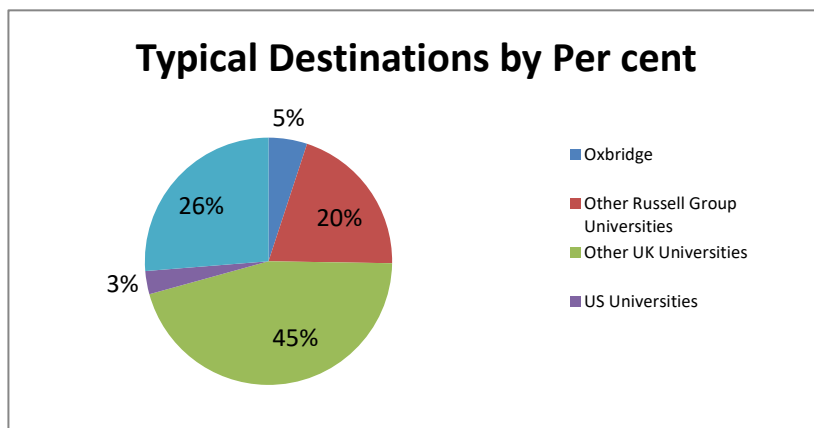
IB Results	Percentage of Students Receiving Result Worldwide Last Year	Percentage of Students Receiving Result at Our School Last Year
45	.24%	
44	.45%	
43	.73%	
42	1.1%	
41	1.4%	
40, etc	2.0%	

Notes: Please note if students are restricted to a certain number of A2 or AS they are allowed to take on or if there were/are scheduling conflicts, etc. Also, note if all students are required to take a certain subject or exam (like Critical Thinking, etc). If the student has self-studied any subject for a certain reason, please include this information too. The more context, the better.

School Leavers

Number of Students in last Graduating Class:

Typical Destinations by Per cent (out of 100%):



Number of Students Applying to the US This Year:

Number of Students at the School Who Have Attended US Universities in Last Five Years:

Names of US Universities Our Pupils Have Attended in Last Five Years:

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