

US college application

My journey began several years prior to the active application process. Studying in the United States has been a lingering thought and a distant goal of mine for most of my teenage years. I know many people have similar aspirations and goals, and my hopes are to make this process more familiar and digestible for them through sharing my own experiences.

At first glance, the application process to US colleges might seem complicated, and that is because it is. There are a lot of forms to complete, and the earlier you start working on them the better.

Given that there are over 5000 different colleges in the US, it is crucial to narrow down your options early on and it's best if you have a strategy. My first step in this process was deciding which part of the States I wanted to go to. Another way I narrowed my options down, was by deciding the area of studies I was interested in. There are many websites that were very helpful in discovering my options such as College Board.

At this point I started making a list of potential schools to research based on location and academic focus. The research process was perhaps the most tedious and time-consuming part, but also one of the most important. My research consisted of looking through each website and reading up on the school's focus, majors, and minors they had to offer, considering living opportunities, application deadlines and any other factor that was relevant. Google searches and finding reviews on other sites also proved helpful.

During this process I took notes and created a system, with the help of which I was able to compare the different schools. In the end I narrowed down my options to about 10 universities.

Something I had to consider was which standardized tests I would be required to take. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools decided to not require these, or be test-optional. It may be required to take the SAT or ACT in coming years again, especially at stronger, more competitive (such as Ivy League) schools. None of the schools I applied to required these tests, so I decided against taking them.

Given that I went to a non-English high school, I did have to take a language exam. I took the TOEFL test, it is widely accepted internationally, but it's a good idea to look into what tests specific schools accept before taking any. The TOEFL is not an easy, or a cheap test, but practice tests are available online. I highly recommend practicing with these to anyone who's planning on taking the test. It is however possible to take the test multiple times for the best results.

When it comes to application types, there are usually two, sometimes three, deadlines for each college: Early Action (EA, beginning of Nov.), Early Decision (ED, beginning of Nov.), and Regular Action (RA, beginning of Jan.). Early Decision is restrictive: if you are granted admission, you must accept the offer. Unless you are certain about where you want to go, this is not the best option as you can only apply ED to one college. Early Action on the other hand is non-restrictive and is the best option in my opinion (you get your admissions decision in December). The benefit

of applying early is that you show your commitment and interest and have less competition. If you apply early, you can get three responses: accepted, deferred, and rejected. Accepted means that you were granted admission, deferred means that you can opt into a re-evaluation of your application during the Regular Action timeline, and rejected means that you were not granted admission and can't be re-evaluated during RA.

Around the end of my 11th year in high school is when I got to the point of having a list of schools I was interested in along with notes of my research including all the important deadlines. After this point it was when the thick of the application process started.

Most schools use the Common Application portal, but it might be different for some colleges. Although the Common App makes the process easier, it's still complicated with all the forms to fill out. Every school will require you to fill out a slightly different application, but there's a section for your personal information which will be included in every individual application. It's best to fill out this part first, so you won't have to worry about it later.

Along with slowly filling out my information over the summer, I also started writing the required essays. A long essay is most likely going to be required which should be between 250 and 650 words. This may seem long, but this is one of the most important parts of an application. In this essay (with the help of some prompt questions) I had the chance to show what kind of person I am, what drives me and along with highlighting my strengths, to also be honest about what qualities I plan to improve on through my years of education. Given the importance of this essay, I spent a lot of time thinking and writing, but even more perfecting and correcting. This essay is perhaps the most crucial part of the application, it is what sets people apart and makes someone stand out. This is the biggest chance one has to make an impact with their application. All this being said, it's important to stay accurate and to realistically convey who you are. There are many resources online to help with writing this essay, and it may also help to read existing successful ones. However, it's important to keep in mind that these will only be helpful for gaining inspiration to come up with a personal story of your own.

The next step I had to take was ask some of my teachers' help with writing letters of recommendation. Some schools required more, some didn't require any, but this was another important step, since this provided a chance to give an outside perspective of my personal and academic existence.

I was also required to submit my grades from the previous years of high school. It's important to note that most universities I applied to only accepted my documents if they were formally submitted through an official, school-affiliated email address by my counsellor (for me, head teacher).

There may be other required sections varying from school to school, and most applications will ask for a short essay explaining the reasons why you think you'd thrive there or ways in which you believe you can contribute to their community.

After I was finished with all these steps, all that was left was to check and double check every piece of information to make sure everything is correct since I only had one chance to apply. Once I clicked SUBMIT there was no going back.

Depending on the field of study there might be further requirements. I was applying in the field of art, which meant I had to submit portfolios of my artwork.

After I submitted the last one of my 9 applications, there was much less active work to be done. This is when the waiting began. Over these few months I kept an active look at my emails for notification of any missing documents I had to submit. It was also important to keep focusing on my academic results even through the final months of school. It's required to keep up your grades in order to enroll, even after you have been accepted. I received the decisions beginning December through April. The final decision had to be made and submitted by May 1st.

Although this process is very complicated and time consuming, if you are dedicated and goal oriented, it's extremely rewarding and worth it in the end.

Throughout my year and a half of preparation and application I received guidance from my mentor who made this process digestible. Without her help, I'm confident to say I would not have reached such a great result.

Nora Benko

Syracuse University Class of 2026

My mentor: Liane Czirják (lianeczi@cox.net)